

伏見つかさ

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Illustration かんざきひろ

ore no imouto ga kawaii

ore no imouto ga kawaii wake ga nai

③

俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない

俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない



電撃文庫

Ore no Imouto ga Konna ni Kawaii Wake ga Nai: Volume 3

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Ore no Imouto ga
konnani kawaii
wake ga nai
③



AFTER A STRANGE SERIES OF EVENTS, BOTH I AND KUROKAWA ENDED
UP COMING TO A PUBLISHING COMPANY TO FILE A SUBMISSION. MAY MAY
SAID SHE ABSOLUTELY NERVOUS RIGHT NOW?
- IS SHE REALLY GOING TO BE ALRIGHT?





Masquerade

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デザイン ● 仲麿舎

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1 First Chapter



1.1 First Chapter Part One

It was September. Three months had passed since I entered that absurd life-advice session with my little sister.

Because I had promised her so much back then without thinking, I had been through a lot these several months, and just remembering what had happened made my stomach churn.

I had to go out of my way to help her make friends who had the same hobby. I had to go with her to a meeting for people with that hobby.

To make fond summer memories for her, I had to force myself to go to a place that had nothing to do with me.

And when her secret hobby was leaked, I had to put up quite a fight to help her.

All for the little sister I hated... even I would have to say it was really out-of-character.

But well, there was no helping it.

Nobody had forced me to do anything. I did everything because I had wanted to.

In these several months, I had many conversations with her.

I had come to understand a lot about the inner workings of the little sister I had previously not tried to get to know.

But, if you think that this was enough to change our chilly relationship with each other, then you're wrong.

On the contrary, the relationship had deteriorated. I won't go into the details though.

I hated my little sister just as always, so I didn't care.

And my little sister hated me more than ever.

On top of that, she kept heaping unreasonable demands on me in the name of "life advice."

... It was absolutely unbearable.

These were the feelings that appropriately characterized my, Kousaka Kyouusuke's, present condition.

1.2 First Chapter Part Two

When I entered the living room, the very little sister I had mentioned was on her phone.

She was wearing a tight-fitting pair of jeans with her legs crossed in her usual position, sunk deeply into the sofa.

Her shirt was baggy enough to hide her hands inside. That was probably what was in fashion these days.

As a matter of fact, she looked good no matter what she put on. Ugh, it was pretty annoying how I could think that so naturally.

And so, my good-looking little sister was on her phone, laughing at something.

"Eh~? Seriously?! What's up with that? So in the end, she dumped him? Heeh, really...ahaha, I would have never guessed."

Her hair was dyed a light brown, both her ears were pierced, and her long nails glistened

with nail polish. Her face, already attractive enough to turn heads even if she didn't wear any cosmetics, was polished with carefully applied makeup. She carried herself with a mature air that seemed quite out of place for a junior high school student.

Her frame was slender and tall, but she was also filled out in just the right places.

This absurdly refined girl was my little sister, Kousaka Kirino.

She was a fourteen-year-old junior high school student. She did modeling work for a teen magazine, was the ace on the track team, scored in the top five in the prefecture on her standardized tests, and was an amazing girl all around. She was completely different from her ordinary older brother.

However, she also had an unthinkable secret hobby. An impossible hobby that made me question my sanity after I found out about it.

If you want to know what it was... well, it's incredibly difficult to say...

My little sister loved 18+ bishoujo games and so-called eroge.

She was especially and unbearably in love with the "imouto" genre, and had accumulated a secret stash of those types of items in a secret storage space behind her bookcase.

In addition, she also had a lot of DVD boxes for children's anime, and other things...

When she had first shown me her collection, I thought my eyes were going to bulge out of their sockets.

No matter how many times I tell this story, it sounds like a lie... but everything I just told you right now was the truth...

"Yeah... yeah... alright, see you tomorrow~~"

My little sister finished her sentence in an overly sweet voice, and cut off the phone call.

... To someone like me who knows her true nature, there was nothing more sickening than that.

I wanted to go grab a drink from the refrigerator, but in my house, the living room served as both the kitchen and the dining room, so to get there I had no choice but to pass through Kirino's field of vision.

I wanted to have as little to do with my sister as possible, so I hesitated at the entrance to the living room.

... Why am I acting this way? ... Hah... the only people who could possibly understand my state of mind right now are other people who have incredibly unpleasant little sisters like this...

A pinging sound signaled that she had gotten an email. It seemed that right after she had cut off her phone call, an email had been sent to my little sister's cell phone.

Junior high school girls are always in a hurry, aren't they? They don't even seem to have time to breathe.

"Ugh."

The moment Kirino read her mail, she made an ugly face. Next, she began to click her tongue moodily in rapid succession, and after pushing a few buttons on her cell phone, she put the receiver to her ear. It seemed that she was calling the person who had sent her the email.

"... Hey! Swirly four-eyes! Are you serious?! Go die! I can't believe this! I already told you I don't want to!"

As always, she was arrogantly spitting out abuse...

“... Tch, it’s nothing.”

As she judged me as if she were looking at garbage, I hurriedly tried to leave that place.

I may seem pathetic, but this was the consequence of my having broken an unspoken rule.

The brother-sister rule that as long as she didn’t come to me for life advice, we should ignore each other.

This was a rule that we had set just a few months before... but this kind of “unspoken rule” between family members probably existed in any family, even if the fine details were a bit different.

To be able to come to a mutual understanding when you lived with other people, it was obvious that you had to establish rules like this, right?

Well, our sibling relationship was a bit of a special case within that, probably.

And then...

“Hey.”

The minute I had put my hand around the doorknob in an attempt to leave the room, with almost deliberate timing, she raised her voice.

“... What?”

“Come here for a second.”

Sitting there with her legs crossed, Kirino beckoned me over with her finger.

It was an incredibly irritating gesture. It wasn’t how you should treat your aniki who was

three years your senior.

“Quickly.”

“... Yeah yeah.”

Being rushed, I reluctantly obeyed my sister’s command. Neither my sister nor I tried to hide our annoyance.

“Well, what?”

“Huh? You’re the one who asked me what was wrong. You half-asleep or something?”

Kirino’s facial expression warped sourly.

“You want to know the reason I’m angry, right? Sit there.”

She pointed at the floor... this was what I was talking about. What was with that “sit there so I can lecture you” feel to her words?

As if I actually would go as far as to want to hear why you’re angry. Don’t screw with me.

Dammit, I probably should say something here... I resolutely opened my mouth.

“Is it alright if I cross my legs, hmm?”

Kirino thinned her lips, and began to talk.

“Yesterday... well, I was hanging out with *those* people. They invited me, so there was no helping it.”

By “those people,” she was most likely referring to her otaku friends, Saori and Kuroneko. She had been hanging out with these otaku she had gotten to know at an SNS offline meeting quite often lately.

“Saori” and “Kuroneko” were both screen names.

To quickly introduce them...

Saori was taller than 180cm, and her measurements were the same as those of Fujiwara Norika. Both her fashion sense and way of speaking were that of a gross otaku. Her face was always covered by a huge pair of swirly glasses.

She was very considerate, was the leader of the otaku community Kirino belonged to, and had always been such a huge help to me and Kirino. She was also the person Kirino had been talking to on the phone.

Kuroneko was expressionless and unsocial, and on top of that had a sharp mouth and was really hard to get along with. She often had arguments with Kirino about anime and games. Her long hair and bangs were black. Her skin was pure white. She always wore a Gothic Lolita getup, and was a beauty that gave off an entirely different air than Kirino. Kirino called her a “Jakigan Crazy Woman.”¹

Well, they were both weird people.

So, it seemed that Kirino had met with them at the entrance to the electric city, Akihabara.

“And then that black one was five minutes late.”

She was short-tempered, wasn't she? She really didn't have to get so worked up over five minutes...

As I was thinking this, Kirino added a surprising statement.

¹If you forgot what this means, check Volume 1, Chapter 3-4, Note 11.

“Even though I had been waiting there ever since an hour before the meeting time! Isn’t that terrible?!”

An hour before?! H-How much were you looking forward to that meeting...? It’s like this was a first date or something.

The usual you would find no issue with going to a meeting like this late.

“Umm... could it be... that’s what made you angry?”

“That’s just one thing! But after that...”

After all the members had gathered, in order to go window shopping, they entered into Yodobashi Camera. (Well, that was almost something a girl would do... wasn’t it?)

They looked at cell phones, looked at computers, were bowled over by the huge televisions in the video game department, watched a demo movie (it was from some game titled super something war something)... after browsing the shop from one end to the other, they played around with a new Gashapon machine.²

Gashapon, huh? That has a nostalgic ring to it. I used to like those things too, during elementary school.

“And the only one who couldn’t get the secret prize was me! Can you believe that?!”

“... Don’t tell me *that* is what you’re angry about.”

“No, it isn’t. But I kept on playing until I got one! Hmph, don’t underestimate magazine models.”

²The games where you put in money and out comes a capsule with a prize inside. Feel free to Wikipedia it.

... To think that a teen model who had dressed herself readily in Shibuya fashion was there grasping a huge number of hundred yen coins, intensely playing Gashapon... and at the Yodobashi in Akiba? ... That must have been a pretty bizarre spectacle.

To put it simply, Kirino had her wages from her modeling job, so she had no shortage of funds for use in her hobby. That's probably what she meant to express when she said "Don't underestimate magazine models."

So, after spending a ton of money and successfully obtaining the secret prize or whatever, Kirino was guided by Saori next to "Star Kebab,"³ and ate a kebab sandwich.

"A friendly foreigner was working there... the shop is famous in Akiba, I hear."

"... Ah."

... And? When exactly are you planning on telling me why you got angry? How much longer will I have to continue to listen to my little sister's "Akihabara stroll report"? I mean, come on, you're really bad at explaining things! Why did you have to start all the way from the beginning?! I don't need to know about how you met up with the others and how you played Gashapon. Cut to the chase.

Of course, I couldn't say such gutsy things to her, so after that, I had to hear about her trip to Messe Sanoh⁴ and Sofmap⁵, and how she put in a reservation for a game.

This was something I had wanted to ask the previous time I was dragged along to Akihabara, but why is it that otaku in Akihabara basically seemed plot their course to go from game shop to game shop to game shop to game shop?

It wasn't a clothing shop, so why would it matter which store you bought the games from?

³A restaurant in Akihabara. You can Google it.

⁴Video game, adult game, doujin game shop in Akihabara.

⁵Duty free shop in Akiba. Sells a lot of things like games and such. I'd like to take this time to put here verbatim the English greeting message they have on their site about the Akiba Tourist Info Center on the first floor because it is so hilarious: "In this center, Event tour plan for foreigner and guides it to the hoped place. We will recommend to foreign countries as a base for the transmission of information in Akihabara, that you can happily spend the culture and the tradition of Japan." Happily spend the culture indeed.

And also...

“... Why do you have to go all the way to Akiba to reserve the game? Can’t you just buy it at a local store?”

“Depending on the store, you get different special reservation extras with your preorder, idiot. Telephone cards and such.”

That utterance of “idiot” was filled with incredible amounts of scorn. You don’t have to put it so angrily...

By the way, the reason they had gone together to reserve these games was because they could then exchange the extras between each other later (sort of like a trade). For example, if three people bought two games at the three stores Messe Sanoh, Sofmap, and Akibao⁶, they could get three different special extras for each game. Later, by mutual agreement, they would decide how to divide those amongst themselves.

... All I could really say was that there was a lot I didn’t understand.

I guess goods for their favorite games were something they really would go that far to collect...

Some people would even buy complete sets of these goods at auction, so I guess my little sister was within relatively normal limits just trading for her items. I already said this before, but the games and goods my sister collected were stored in the hidden space behind her bookcase. A while ago, I caught a glimpse of one part of my sister’s collection... it was an outrageous lineup, something I could never show our parents. And in the depths of that storage space, an even more menacing set of goods lay in wait. It was scary.

Kirino’s story had still not come to an end.

“And then... we were pretty tired, so we went to a Mister Donut’s and chatted.”

⁶As you can imagine, another game store.

I was pretty tired too, so could you please get to the point soon?

As I listened to her tedious story, Kirino finally seemed to say something that struck at the heart of the matter.

“And then, I started arguing with that black one. She said that Meruru was ‘after all, just a kid’s anime, right?’ and made fun of it.”

Again? How many times have you gotten into an argument with her because of that?! You haven’t gotten tired of that at all?!

By the way, to explain about Kirino and Kuroneko...

They were crazed fans of “Stardust ★ Witch Meruru” and “Maschera ~Lament of a Fallen Beast~,” respectively. Their broadcast times also overlapped, so they clashed with each other.

“And then, of course, I had to get angry, right? I said it... ‘I bought and tried watching that Maschera DVD you said was interesting, but it was just a mix of embarrassing emo speech and stereotypical jakigan disgusting protagonists with superiority complexes.’⁷ It wasn’t fun at all,’ I said.”

First off, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Are you really speaking Japanese?

... Well, for now, I do understand that because you wanted to bash the show, you bought the DVD and scanned it over.

You’d go that far just to win a verbal argument? You’re tenacious, aren’t you?

Well, I suppose she might also have wanted to create more common ground between her and her friend.

⁷Alright, I have to mention this. Kirino uses some really odd slang “Ore TUEEEEE” here, which I had to spend a while google searching. Apparently it is a term related to people who watch anime in which there is some overpowered protagonist who destroys everyone. These people then form some sort of superiority complex by projecting themselves onto this protagonist. That’s quite a lot to pack into three short syllables...

“And then, she told me, ‘Well I haven’t spent even a fraction of a cent on something like Meruru,’ and she hasn’t seen the DVDs. Even though I had bought every volume of Maschera too! It seems that she had seen a bit of it when Saori taped the TV broadcast and put it on her PSP... but that’s not the true Meruru! There’s no way the full splendor of that work can be displayed on such a small screen! Watch the DVD version on a big screen please! Right?! Did you hear what I said, you shitty cat?!”

“Gah...?! Ah, why are you wringing my neck?! It’s not me you’re angry at!”

Hah.... Hah... did she want to kill me?! Shaking off my sister’s hand, I grasped at my neck and breathed heavily.

Ugh.... But... I finally knew what was going on. Even though she had bought and watched all the DVD volumes of a series that she had been recommended by someone, that someone didn’t do the same for her, so she got angry.

Not every junior high schooler just overflows with money like you, you know. Try to understand at least that much.

Having gotten excessively worked up and having tried to strangle me, Kirino placed a hand on her cheek and sighed heavily.

“Phew... and then, when we started arguing, that swirly four-eyes stopped us. ‘Come on, you two... calm down please,’ she told us.”

This was also what always had happened. Saori, the otaku community leader, was very tolerant and considerate, and each and every time, stood between Kirino and Kuroneko as a sort of buffer zone.

Listening further to Kirino’s story, it seemed that afterwards, this type of exchange happened:

“Mhmm, at any rate... examining both your arguments... it seems that both Kuroneko-shi and Kiririn-shi had decided from the very start that each other’s favorite anime was boring.

Of course, every person has their own preferences in terms of what they like or don't like. But in your case, the issue is that you put your preconceptions and prejudices first, and that made it difficult for you to enjoy it, right? If you watch it thinking it's boring from the start, then no matter what you're going to end up being bored. So..."

Saori clapped her hands together.

"How about we hold a Meruru and Maschera appreciation event soon?"

It was in order to remove the preconceptions and prejudices they had towards each other's favorite work, and be able to deepen their mutual understanding.

In an appropriate time and place they could both agree on, they could watch each other's anime while the other person provided commentary... it seemed to be that kind of plan.

"And after that, feel free to have another discussion about the works."

And so, that was the judgment passed down by Saori.

... What a supremely otaku-like way of thinking. Would anyone normally go this far just for the sake of anime?⁸

... I guess that's what makes them otaku. And I know that saying things like "it's just anime" was taboo.

Saori made the following proposition next:

"And if we do this, I want to do it at Kiririn-shi's house."

"Huh?! Why my house?!"

⁸Yes.

By the way, “Kiririn” was Kirino’s screen name. It did not fit her in the least.

At Kirino’s objection, both Kuroneko and Saori responded in their own ways.

“Well... my place is pretty far away, so...”

“... In any case, I don’t have a big screen TV at my house to play the DVDs with. And also, I have a little sister at home, so I can’t bring home a gross otaku and Ms. Super Trendy over here.”

This Kuroneko... those were really words that could get on people’s nerves...

I don’t know what she means by Ms. super trendy⁹, but to think that there was someone who could face Kirino head on in a verbal argument... the world was a big place, wasn’t it? ... well, of course, Kirino took issue with their statements.

“My parents are home too! If people like you came over it would be trouble!”

“Hm? But didn’t you earlier say yourself that for the time being, your parents aren’t in the house on Thursdays, so you watch anime on the television in your living room?”

“Ugh... isn’t that convenient that you remembered that little detail...”

That’s how it was. After I learned Kirino’s secret, she’s been watching anime on the big screen in the living room when my parents weren’t home. Before that, she would watch when nobody was at home.

She had said herself “watch Meruru on a big screen!” so she was pretty much cornered at this point.

⁹The term Kuroneko uses is actually a very specialized Internet slang term, which is why Kyouusuke is confused. But that’s what it basically means - it’s a derogatory way to talk about shallow women who try too hard to follow the latest trends.

“Both Kuroneko-shi and myself also want to take a look at what the home of our beloved Kiririn-shi looks like... and it is also the best environment for us to hold an appreciation event, so won’t you please consider it? ... Ah, and also, if you would like, as a present, I will bring one of the signed comics Kiririn-shi wants.”

“... J-Just do what you want!”

It seemed her objections had been overridden. She had taken the bait.

“.... And that’s why.”

Having finished listening to Kirino’s story, I responded with a curt “Uh-huh...”

After all, it had nothing to do with me. And also, for me, it’s not like my sister’s friends coming over to play was something to make a fuss over. At any rate, I was going out next Thursday anyways, so I wouldn’t be home.

... So ... they would be coming over... hm, if Kirino and Kuroneko got together, they would probably get into another heated argument, which was a bit worrisome.

Well, Saori was also coming, so they should be alright.

That’s what I thought, without a care in the world.

1.3 First Chapter Part Three

It was Thursday. We didn’t have school because it was a national holiday, so I had spent the day with my childhood friend.

We had gone to a bookstore in front of the station to look at reference books, had eaten at the park on the way back, and had stopped by Manami’s house for a snack and for some idle chatter... it was an extremely normal day.

It was a calm, boring, sleep-inducing day filled with no events that were worth mentioning.

I wished that these normal days could continue without incident.

This was just my opinion, but “happiness” was the moment when you could personally and honestly affirm that all was well with yourself and your surroundings.

In that regard, the life of Kousaka Kyousuke was relatively on the right track.

Aren't you jealous of me? These days were commonplace, normal, calm, boring, and for that they were happy and I could live like this for the rest of my life. Yes, like this, all was well in my life.

Of course, every single time, my little sister shattered that banality.

And this day was no different. It was three in the afternoon. After I separated from my childhood friend, I was walking home while gazing lazily up at the sky and yawning.

... Well, now. Shall I read manga, or take an afternoon nap? I have plenty of time to do what I want before dinner.

As I was thinking these things, I arrived home, and found some shoes in the entryway I was not used to seeing.

They were very small and decorated with a fluttery pattern. However I looked at it, these shoes didn't fit Kirino's tastes.

“Hmm... ahh.”

Now that I think about it, today was the day they were having that “anime appreciation event” or whatever here.

Kirino's otaku friends had come over to play.

Going up the stairs, I put down my belongings in my room. I washed my hands, rinsed my mouth out, and then deciding to go drink some juice, headed in the direction of the living room where the refrigerator was.

"... It's really quiet, isn't it?"

... Isn't this a bit strange? Knowing them, those people should be making a lot of noise around here... but...

1.4 First Chapter Part Four

When I opened the door, the inside of the room was dark. It seemed like the curtains were drawn closed.

... If they weren't here, they probably were in Kirino's room playing.

I turned on the lights. The lights blinked. The fluorescent lights may have been dying.

Hm. I'll have to re... place... them...

"Wahh!"

The instant the lights fully came on, I almost jumped back in surprise.

The reason was that right in front of me on the sofa, there was a girl dressed completely in black sitting calmly. Just like a queen sitting on her throne. She watched me with a penetrating, icy stare.

As I stood there speechless, she grinned at me.

“... Hm... so you’ve made it this far... I give you my compliments.”

“This is my house.”

I retorted instantaneously. What was up with her acting like she was some wicked yakuza boss?

This Gothic Lolita was Kuroneko. She was Kirino’s otaku friend, and, concurrently, her verbal sparring partner.

And then...

Why was it that, even though she was supposed to be here to play with Kirino, she was sitting alone in the pitch-black living room? I asked her this question which I should have asked from the get-go.

“... What are you doing?”

“... Nothing really.”

She quickly turned away from me. I hadn’t the slightest idea what she was thinking, but she seemed almost a bit sad about something.

The living room fell dead silent. It was uncomfortable.

I mean, I was standing here in complete silence with one of my little sister’s friends, you know? What should I do?

“Nothing? Uhh...”



As always, she was a hard person to deal with...

Shouldn't she at least give a proper greeting to the eldest brother of the house she came to visit?

Faced with this strange set of circumstances, I couldn't settle on what I should do... for now, I opened up the curtains and brightened up the room. The evening sun chased away the dimness in the room.

When I looked back, I saw that Kuroneko had closed both her eyes tightly. She had completely lost that air of coolness she was carrying before. She looked more like a kitten who had just gotten her forehead poked.

"... Sorry, is it too bright?"

"... I do not do very well with sunlight."

You a vampire or something? Or maybe she was just quoting an anime again.

"Well, just make yourself at... well you already have I guess."

I made do with those words, but really, what should I do here...?

For now, I should probably figure out what was going on, so I asked.

"By the way, where's Kirino?"

"... In her room."

... Hm, so then...

"And Saori? Is she also in Kirino's room?"

“She didn’t come.”

“Eh?”

She didn’t come?

“Why not?”

“... She had urgent business to attend to. Yesterday, she came to my house with an ‘I’m really sorry. I suddenly have to go out of town, so please hand this over to Kiririn-shi,’ and left this behind.”

Kuroneko showed me a manga of “Stardust ★ Witch Meruru.” It was probably the signed book or whatever Kirino had mentioned earlier. I don’t know what kind of urgent business had popped up, but she sure was someone who kept her word.

“Please hand this over for me.”

“... Alright.”

I began thinking while Kuroneko handed me the signed book.

Saori was absent on urgent business. Hmm... was that so...?

... Ugh... for some reason, I had a bad feeling about this. Hold on, wait wait. So that means...

“So you were alone here with Kirino today?”

“..... Yes.....”

Somehow... I knew what was going on... so.... It was like that, right?

Because Saori had not come, today's anime appreciation event became one in which only Kirino and Kuroneko were in attendance, right?

That was absurd no matter how I thought about it...! Wasn't that just asking for trouble?!¹⁰

It would be unusual if they got together and didn't break out into an argument, right? There was no reason this would have gone well.

I see...! I see I see I see. I knew exactly what was going on! I knew it all!

"And what?"

"... You got into an argument with Kirino, didn't you?"

"... Hm, aren't you sharp? Yes, precisely."

Facing each other, we fell into silence. So, in other words...

Kuroneko came to this house for the sake of the anime appreciation event. But, Saori, who usually handled the disputes between Kirino and Kuroneko, couldn't come due to urgent business.

And then unexpectedly, Kuroneko and Kirino had to play by themselves...

And just like always, they got into a huge argument. And without anyone to mediate the dispute...

¹⁰Literally, "weren't you placing bitter enemies in the same boat here?!"

Kirino became sulky and shut herself up in her room.

Kuroneko faded into the pitch-black living room.

This was just my guess, but I probably had guessed correctly for the most part... geez, why did it come to this?

After they had finally found time to play with their friend, didn't they think that they should try a bit harder to get things to go well?

"..... Hm."

It's just that there were some points that should be examined in this case.

In spite of breaking out into an argument in my home, Kirino had not driven Kuroneko out of the house.

In spite of knowing that Saori would not be coming today, Kuroneko still came over and had not returned yet.

What was up with that? Was I reading too much into it? Well, I personally don't think so. If you ask me why, it's because having been dragged along to their events and other things, I've watched Kirino's and Kuroneko's conversations occurring right in front of me.

So...

"You're thinking something pointless, aren't you?"

"I-I'm not doing anything like that."

I denied her statement with a stiff, twitching smile... she's pretty sharp, isn't she?

Well, at any rate. This had nothing to do with me.

I couldn't stay here and take this damn heavy atmosphere. I had just gotten home, but maybe I should go kill some time at an arcade...

It came at the exact moment I thought that.

With almost suspicious timing, the cell phone in my back pocket began to vibrate.

“... Hm.”

It was an email. I had a bad feeling about this... and as I thought, it was from Saori.

Kyousuke-shi. I leave the rest to you.

.....

Gazing at the LCD screen of the cell phone with dead fish eyes...

“... Are you being serious, Saori-shi...?”

I wearily muttered.

1.5 First Chapter Part Five

“... Hm, suddenly you're speaking funny¹¹... are you going crazy or something?”

¹¹Kuroneko uses the term “Maro,” which Google searching seems to suggest is based off a character that speaks in old dialect. Once again, there is a formality system in Japanese that Saori uses that I never really try to translate into English, since while speaking like that would sound strange in Japanese, it would sound intensely bizarre in English...

“... It’s nothing.”

I responded dejectedly to Kuroneko, who appeared to have perfectly made herself at home and was flipping through a weekly manga publication that had been lying around.

Alright, what should I do...? I turned the situation over in my head to find the best solution. At this point, abandoning the situation as is and going off to do my own thing was no longer an option. Because, over these past few months, I had accumulated a great deal of debt that I now owed to Saori.

Call her my benefactor if you want. If she wanted me to do this... I couldn’t refuse. I had to do something about it.

... That asshole. Sending me this email with this timing, as if she were watching us through the window...

Saori definitely had good intuition. When she found out that she couldn’t come due to urgent business, she probably guessed what was going to happen. And then she, thankfully, passed her duties down and depended on me. I might be exaggerating, but that’s what I thought... geez.

... Well, there was no helping it. And so, the settlement of this anime appreciation event business was left to me.

Alright... umm, first... I’ll listen to both sides of the argument, figure out why they were arguing, and somehow smooth things over... and I’ll stay with them until they agree to watch anime together. But then, they might get into an argument again, so I’ll smooth that over as well.

I’ll manage... to allow them to have fun, and then to allow their relationship to deepen.

In Saori’s place, I would become the buffer zone between them.

“... Just thinking about it makes my stomach hurt.”

She was always doing things like this, wasn't she...? But she always did it with her trademark curvy smile... Heh, it wasn't until she was gone that I understood her true value...

Honestly, I should be thankful. Once again, I thanked Saori for being friends with Kirino.

"... What hurts?"

"Nothing."

Alright, let's begin. Pulling myself together, I started to act. The first person I had to deal with was the one right in front of me.

"... By the way, uh, today... why did you argue with Kirino? I guess it was anime..."

"Wrong."

Kuroneko emotionlessly butted in. But without having a subsequent sentence to connect her rebuttal to, she fell into silence.

When I waited very patiently, she finally gave a sigh that seemed to be loaded with hidden meaning.

"... You know, it's not like I wanted to get into an argument when I came here... If Saori wasn't going to be here, then I would take that into account in my actions. So, even though I came here to watch anime, I tried to talk about anime as little as possible. She... probably also tried to do the same."

"... I see."

"... You have a problem with that?"

“T-There’s no reason I would.”

I didn’t have a problem, but I was surprised.

... But I see... she had come to a friend’s house to play, right? So she wouldn’t deliberately talk about a topic that was likely to lead into an argument.

“So, why did you get into an argument?”

“Cell phone novels.”

Kuroneko spat that out irritatedly.

... Cell phone novels... what were those? Umm... they were novel-like things that were written and read on cell phones, and were pretty popular with the female crowd, right? That might have been a bit off, but that was the general picture I think. Certainly, I think recently, some cell phone novels had been turned into books and movies too.

“So, what about cell phone novels?”

“Fufuu, I wrote a cell phone novel, you know. Certainly, you’ve made things like manga and novels too, right? Want to take a look at mine? Well, it’s a masterpiece though, if I do say so myself~,’ she told me.”

Honestly, it was a pretty spot-on impersonation. It was an inspired performance, down to the irritating way she said “fufuu.”

But, to think Kirino had written a cell phone novel... that fit her almost spookily well. It definitely seemed like something trendy girls would do.

And, she seemed strangely confident about it... but it was probably her first novel, right?

“Was it boring?”

“I wanted to kill her.”

It was that bad?! Exactly what did she write?! Suddenly, I wanted to know!

I could understand how reading a boring novel or manga could get you into a pretty angry mood...

But wasn't it a bit excessive to want to kill the author?

Perhaps she could infer from my expression what I had been thinking, but Kuroneko began to explain expressionlessly.

“First of all, the protagonist was the spitting image of the writer, and even referred to herself with ‘atashi.’¹²”

“Kill her!”

Suddenly, at that moment, I could give a pretty good valuation as to what the high-and-mighty contents of that novel were!

“T-That's not all... she would be fine with starting a new line even though she only had written two or three characters, and then would start a new page when she felt like it. She used more emoticons and had more types of symbols than punctuation marks, although punctuation was few and far between in the first place, and she would switch from third person to first person without warning, making it hard to read, she filled it with cutaways and point-of-view changes, the first person portions matched her vocal patterns exactly, half of the contents were just her praising herself, the author and the characters would start meta conversations with each other... and to top it all off...”

Speaking completely indifferently, Kuroneko paused slightly,

¹²This is the first person pronoun Kirino uses, and is a rather feminine way of saying “I.”

“And then there was a Kuroneko character that was clearly modeled off me who was raped and killed.”

“That’s terrible!!”

She did that deliberately, didn’t she?! If she showed that to her friend, then not only would she get angry, a fight would definitely break out!

“... Uh, I’m really sorry about that...”

Kuroneko nodded, and once again fell into silence.

At this rate, nothing would move forward. I desperately tried to keep the conversation going.

“... I-I mean, you sure do know a lot about writing. You also draw manga...”

“... Not really... I’m just a bit above a complete beginner...”

Kuroneko glanced back to me. Alright, looks like I’m onto something here. Do your best, Kyouzuke...!

“I mean, I think it’s pretty impressive. If it were me, I wouldn’t be able to explain where and what was wrong in my sister’s cell phone novel. You could say what you did because you know the accepted... or should I say, right way of doing things. You really know what to look for!”

“... Hm. You’re misunderstanding a bit.”

Kuroneko had turned to face me head on. It appeared that she had taken the bait.

“Whether for manga or novels, there isn’t really a ‘completely correct’ way to do things. Even if you put in a lot of onomatopoeia, even if you have a lot of line breaks, even if you use

a lot of pictographs and emoticons, no matter what you make and how you make it, nobody can tell you that you're definitely doing it wrong... that's what I think. This goes for cell phone novels especially, since they're such a new written form."

Imitating the experts and just making things based completely on conventional rules and customs was not necessarily the correct ways of doing things, she continued.

"In a way, you could certainly say it is 'correct' to be able to take in the grand traditions developed and polished for a long time by our predecessors, to be able to take in the newest trends and learn the clever strategies for making your work popular. There's no mistaking that. But, just because that's true, that doesn't mean it's right to just categorically reject every other way of doing things. Looking down on everything and preaching tradition is something an idiot wannabe-expert would say. They're on the same level as the dumbasses who pay no attention to fundamentals and fill their writing with 'gdgd'¹³ and 'sense of wonder and so on.' It's natural that why people write what they write varies from person to person, and for a hundred people there would be over a hundred million things they could want to make... so there is no absolutely correct way of doing things. Hm, this is certainly an amateur speaking... but it's not like we're doing this for a living, so we should just write the way we want to write."

Just like Kirino, when it came to talking about her own field, she was quite talkative.

But this aggressive style of speech... she seemed to be pretty annoyed.

"The hatred I expressed before along with all those points I listed were, to the very end, just things that did not fit my own personal preferences. I would like you to please not misunderstand that point."

"... I see."

I had no idea.

But because of her being able to get that all out to me, Kuroneko seemed refreshed.

¹³Gdgd is slang for "gudaguda," which means wearisome or tiring. Kuroneko might be referring to the possibility of the writing itself being tiresome.

The previous depressing atmosphere had lightened. First step, complete... so, the next step is...

“Well... leaving that aside, I’ll go prepare some juice and snacks... hold on just a second.”

“... Why is it that even though I came here to see that girl, I ended up spending time with her brother?”

“... Don’t ask me.”

Why is it that even though it’s a holiday, I ended up here sucking up to my little sister’s friend?

1.6 First Chapter Part Six

Leaving the living room, I ascended the stairs.

I wasn’t going to prepare snacks, but was going to talk with my little sister instead.

“Kirino... hey. You’re in there, right? Open up.”

Trying not to be heard by Kuroneko, I spoke in a soft voice and knocked.

After I continued to knock for a while, the door opened violently. It was as if she was trying to hit me in the face by opening it that way, but I had predicted it. *Bam*. I stopped the door with one hand.

With a facial expression that seemed to be disappointed that she had missed, Kirino clicked her tongue.

“..... What?”

“Don’t give me that. What are you doing here after abandoning your friend down there?”

“Eroge. I was just reading the blog of my true little sisters.”

“...!!!”

D-Don’t say that so matter-of-factly! Ugh, cut it out, your onii-chan is getting a headache, you know.

“... What’s with that gross face you’re making? You got a problem?”

“No shit!! How could you call your friend over to play, and then just go off playing games by yourself?!”

“... Huh? So, you’re suggesting that we play eroge together? Heh, hentai like you sure have different ways of thinking.”

“Y-You bitch...”

Ugh... I’m so pissed off! And also... you say that two people playing eroge is something a hentai would say? ... Hah, well now you’ve said it... about three months ago, don’t you remember when you came to me and ordered me to play eroge with you?!

As always, she just completely ignores her own shortcomings, this hentai!

Ugh... this isn’t good, I have to calm down... I was supposed to be helping her make up with Kuroneko, but here I am getting into an argument with her myself. Even while grinding my teeth, I pushed my anger back down deep into my chest.

“... Kirino-san... your friend came today, so I think you should keep her company, right...?”

“Shut up.”

Kirino narrowed her eyes, irritated. She once again tried to force the door closed.

T-This little...!

I physically wedged my body in the path of the door, and that should stop... augh!!

“Owww!!”

She closed that door as hard as she could! Normally, you would close the door a bit more softly when you saw someone in the way!

But here she just sped up, didn't she?!

“Eh, that felt pretty gross.”

It felt like you just stepped on and squished a frog, didn't it?! You're crushing your brother!

Why is it that every single time I tried to have a conversation with my own sister, I had to go through this much trouble?! Dammit! This isn't normal...!

In any case, I had not risked my life in vain, and my sister's plan of retreat had been foiled. I looked really pathetic in this position, but it seemed that I would be able to talk to Kirino now. First, I wanted to ask about Kirino's reason for getting into a fight with Kuroneko.

“... Y-You... a friend came all this way to your house, so play nice. Don't get into fights with her.”

Why was I here repeating these obvious words to my sister?

“... You’re really going to try to convince me from that position...?”

Facing her brother who was still stuck in between the door, Kirino spoke in an impressed way that was rare for her.

But if you’re really impressed, can’t you loosen up on the door a bit...? Kirino did not grant my request, but did at least give me a response.

“... It’s not like we’re good friends or anything... and she was the one who started the argument~.”

“Liar. She told me that in the cell phone novel you wrote, there was a character that resembled her who was raped and killed. You’re clearly the one at fault here.”

“Huh?! What the hell is she saying?! That’s completely wrong!”

“W-What’s wrong about it...?”

Without responding to my question, Kirino let go of the door and went into her room.

Having been suddenly released from being crushed by the door, I was disoriented and puzzled¹⁴.

From inside the room, Kirino beckoned to me with her finger.

“Come in.”

“A-Alright...”

As always, I felt frightened as I entered into my sister’s room.

¹⁴Literally, “a question mark floated above my head.”

It was a tidy room that was colored completely red. There was a strange, sweet smell in the air.

There was a bed and a computer desk, and a bookshelf... and etc. etc, there were no striking features of the room at all. Perhaps it was for accommodating her friends, but in the center of her room there was a folding table spread out, and on top of it was a single cell phone and a number of blackish-looking books.

Kirino threw herself down on her bed with a thump, and pointed to a black book.

“Read a bit of that.”

“W-What is this...? This... what does this have to do with what we were talking about?”

Just as my sister had ordered, I picked up the black book and flipped through it. On the front cover of the book, there was a painting-like illustration of a Gothic Lolita girl, and the title was written in stylish, cursive English letters.

And inside of that book was...

“... Manga... and... a novel...?”

“And after that, a thick mess of production materials.”

“... What is all this?”

“Doujinshi. A derivative work Kuroneko made for Maschera.”

Kirino’s spoke irately, and thinned her lips.

To properly explain it, doujinshi were books that were financed by the authors themselves, and these books were bought and sold at events. A derivative work was something that used

settings and characters from already established anime and manga. When I had been taken along for one of their offline meetings, this was all vaguely explained to me, so I knew a bit about the subject.

“And... what’s wrong with this doujinshi?”

“... Hmph... then, while I read this cell phone novel that clearly stinks of rubbish, you can read this. You said that you had watched all of Maschera, right?’ she said.”

“I see.”

Honestly, it was a pretty spot-on impersonation. It was an inspired performance, down to the condescending way she said “hmph.”

But... so this was a doujinshi that Kuroneko had made, was it...? It really didn’t seem to fit Kirino’s tastes...

“Was it boring?”

“I wanted to kill her.”

It was that bad?! ... Also, this is pretty similar to the exchange I had with Kuroneko before!

“W-What kind of story was it?”

“... Tch, it was a so-called ‘time retrogression story.’ And, what’s more, the protagonist was definitely in the ‘U-1’ category.”

“Why are you speaking in code?”

I could infer what a “time retrogression story” was just from the words, but I couldn’t make heads or tails of the word “U-1.” Did it have something to do with fighting tournaments

or something?

Perhaps sensing my confusion, Kirino began to irately explain.

“Both ‘time retrogression story’ and ‘U-1’ are terms that are used in relation to derivative works. ‘Time regression stories’ are, just like they sound, stories in which the protagonist travels back in time. Taking Evangelion as an example, you could have a story in which Ikari Shinji travels back to the timeline of the first episode from the final world while retaining his memories and experience, and repeats his fight with the Angels... those kinds of stories are what we call ‘time regression stories.’ It’s crucial that the person in question retain his memories and experiences, and that’s why the author and the protagonist can freely change history as he wishes. Not only does the author of the derivative work destroy all the previously established plot from the original work, he can make a completely different story.”

“Ahh.”

I haven’t watched Evangelion, you know, so even if you give that example...

Well, I understood, at least, that it was a story in which the protagonist began the story again in extremely favorable circumstances, and a completely different story unfolded.

“And then, ‘U-1’ refers to a story in which the protagonist has a bunch of random things added to him, and becomes all-powerful and the strongest character. Like, maybe he actually had inherited the blood and powers of a demon king but those powers were normally sealed, or maybe he could enslave the opposite sex with just a smile but he didn’t realize it himself, or maybe when he’s serious, angel wings sprout from his back, or maybe he’s an S-rank super-powerful person but he’s only B-rank because he never sent in the right application... this kind of thing was used heavily in a famous derivative work of an eroge at a certain point, so the term ‘U-1’¹⁵ is a warping of the name of the protagonist of that work. Another term, ‘supashin,’ refers to the same kind of thing.”

“I-I’m having a hard time understanding...”

But you sure do know a lot about this! Even though she was a junior high student, this

¹⁵Pronounced “yuu-ichi.” And I have no idea what eroge she’s referring to. If you have a better idea feel free to tell me and I’ll give you credit.

wasn't going to be easy!

“So... in other words, the doujinshi Kuroneko made fit into those ‘time regression story’ and ‘U-1’ categories.”

“Yes. After the first season’s final boss ‘Queen of Nightmare’ was done in by the protagonist of the original story ‘Shikkoku,’ she returned back to the time of episode one while retaining all her memories, possessed the corpse of a girl who had died in the original story, and got close to ‘Shikkoku’ as a normal young girl... that kind of thing happened.”

“Hmm... so... unlike the original story, the last boss became the protagonist.”

“Yeah. That black one always cosplays the ‘Queen of Nightmare,’ so isn’t it pretty obvious that she’s projecting herself onto the protagonist of her doujinshi? At that point, it was just painful to read, and goosebumps had already... ugh.”

You told her that to her face, didn’t you? That’s why you got into an argument.

As I thought, you’re the one at fault here.

“... So, how exactly did that become ‘I wanted to kill her’? The artwork too... I mean, it bothers me a bit that the chins all look so pointed, but I think the art is pretty good... and from what you told me, the story seems relatively interesting, I think.”

“Heh... why are you talking like you actually know what you’re talking about after just looking at the artwork and listening to the outline of the story? This doujinshi’s bad points aren’t on the surface like that.”

“... So where are they?”

“You can’t figure it out after flipping through it? All the pages are incredibly difficult to read.”

Kirino muttered frankly. She pointed to one of the pages in the book.

“Just look at these completely black pages. More than ninety percent of them are buried under text. She needs to use more linebreaks! And what’s more, she uses so many hard-to-understand kanji and phrases, she just fills up space going on and on about things that nobody cares about, and doesn’t think about the reader in the least. Especially during the battle scenes! They’re so hard to read! I mean, for example, if there’s an explosion, can’t you just write ‘dokaan!’ or something? Just use a sound effect like that? Anyone who reads that would understand what was happening. And when someone’s attacking, you can make them say ‘Waah!’ as a battle cry or something, and when they take damage you could make them scream ‘Gyah!’ or something! That’s definitely easy to understand, easy to read, and everyone would read that, right? If you ask me, the stories she writes don’t go an inch past self-gratification.”

I haven’t read the entire thing, so even if you say that, I can’t really say I understand where you’re coming from.

But the way you talk is incredibly irritating.

Also, to the very end, that was the writing method of the “Kirino school of cell phone novels,” wasn’t it? If the genre or the medium changed, then the most effective way of making the work probably changed as well. And it’s not like you’re running a hotel or something, so I don’t see anything wrong with prioritizing self-satisfaction over everything else.

“And what’s more, there are around two hundred pages of production materials that come with this doujinshi. Reading those in advance, there are a lot of original, incomprehensible technical terms that don’t even exist in the original work, and because of that I can’t even understand half of what’s going on in the actual story. The technical terms themselves all stink of immature BS... stuff like Divine Demonic Destructive Thrust! I can’t read that at all! And what’s more, she puts little ‘stylish’-looking rubies in katakana above these terms!¹⁶ And it turns out to be some weird German or something! ... And, also, there’s one thing that I can’t swallow most of all...”

Kirino ground her teeth with all her might, and after pausing for a second spit it out.

¹⁶Kanji in Japanese often is annoying in that the pronunciation of kanji in made-up words is often ambiguous and heavily context-based. Therefore, when someone invents a term (in kanji) and wants the reader to be sure he knows how to pronounce the term as intended, he/she can write out the pronunciation of the term using one of Japan’s phonetic alphabets, katakana or hiragana, in smaller font above the kanji. That is what a “ruby” is in this context.

“There was an original character that was obviously modeled after me, who had a magical ‘charm’ spell cast on her and became the protagonist’s sex slave.”

“Now, that’s something to get pissed about!!”

Until a few moments before, I had thought that Kirino was the one at fault here, but instantly I lost any desire to continue defending Kuroneko.

What exactly is that Gothic Lolita doing to other people’s little sisters?! Both of them were at fault here, weren’t they?!

Also, you two, you both sure did similar things to each other, didn’t you?!

You both wrote each other into your stories and did terrible things to them.

You both read each other’s work and bashed them condescendingly.

And then you got into a fight and both of you started sulking... and that’s how we got to where we are right now.

“..... Hah.”

But, Kirino... you...

“Did you seriously read... all of that incredibly thick packet of production materials?”

“Huh? What are you saying? That’s obvious, isn’t it? If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be able to say anything.”

And, that’s that. Well? Doesn’t it make you want to scowl?

Just look at how close they really were.

If Saori were here, she would definitely hold her stomach and burst out laughing right here.

Geez, they're a troublesome pair, aren't they...

Anyhow, I now understood both sides of the story. The second stage had been cleared.

So, for the next step, I should take them from this situation to the point where they can hold the anime appreciation event, right?

I don't know how much I can do to that end, but I was going to give it a go.

And, I'll just say one last thing.

Junior high school girls shouldn't just suddenly start babbling about things like sex slaves! I'm definitely going to stop her before she does that next time!

1.7 First Chapter Part Seven

Holding a tray of juice and snacks, I entered the living room.

I saw Kuroneko sunk into the couch, having completely made herself at home. It was the place where Kirino usually sat, so it felt somewhat strange. I spoke to her, feeling almost the same way I felt when speaking to my sister.

"... Sorry to keep you waiting."

"... I already got tired of waiting. How long exactly does it take to prepare juice and some snacks?"

She spoke vacantly while her gaze was focused on one of the magazines Kirino had modeled for.

... What's with the big attitude, even though you're a guest in someone else's home? You sure resemble a certain someone I know.

As these thoughts ran through my mind, I set the juice and snacks on top of the table.

... Alright, shall we begin?

I plopped down a DVD case on top of the table.

"It took a bit more time than I thought to get this ready..."

"This is..."

Looking at the DVD case, Kuroneko's eyes narrowed.

The DVD I had brought was the first volume of "Stardust ★ Witch Meruru."

"What are you trying to do?"

"... I wanted to watch this with you, so I borrowed it and brought it here. Let's watch it on the big screen. The 'real' Meruru, or whatever."

I spoke in a half-resigned tone of voice.

Kuroneko's expression didn't change at all, and she followed me with just her eyes.

"... Have you seen this anime?"

“I haven’t. I mean, I haven’t seen any anime really. But Kirino kept on going on and on about how interesting this was, so I’ve been interested in it for a while... so, if you help me follow the show I’d be really grateful.”

There was a brief period of silence... and at last, Kuroneko softly picked up the Meruru DVD case, and after scrutinizing it in a profound manner, faced me and presented the case to me.

“Here you go.”

“... Alright.”

I took the case and walked to the front of the TV, where I set everything up.

The DVD tray that held the actual DVD receded back into the player... and the television screen suddenly came to life.

A menu screen was displayed. Ignoring the options for “Bonus Footage” and “Seiyuu¹⁷ Interviews,” I selected the choice “From the Beginning” and hit the confirmation button on the remote control.

When I did that, a pink-haired girl wearing strangely suggestive clothing pitter-pattered over from the edge of the screen.

At the center of the screen, she spun around with a *kururin*. Wielding her staff (spear?), she shouted in a high-pitched loli voice.

Stardust ★ Witch Meruru STAAAAAART~~~!

I can’t do this... this is way more embarrassing than I thought it would be...! I felt my head heating up.

¹⁷Voice actor/actress.

But, as the person who had suggested doing this in the first place, it wasn't like I could back down now.

Grinding my teeth fiercely, I prepared myself for what was to come.

However, in the next few moments, events that would rip through my preparation like paper awaited me.

The scene cut to a girl standing stock still in a meadow. She looked a lot like Meruru, but she was wearing very normal clothes. She carried a red book bag across her back, so she was probably an elementary school student.

The girl had her eyes closed, and her hands were joined together as if she were praying. With the girl remaining in the center of the shot, the camera began to rotate slowly around her. A pink light shined from the girl's hands and stardust started overflowing from them, at which point the music began.

Wrapped up in the light, the girl spun around. With a *pashi*, *pasha*, the girl's clothing vanished one by one in sequential order. First it was her outer clothing, followed by her skirt, followed by her camisole, and followed by her shorts...

"Isn't this bad?! They can show something like this on television?!"

"This is the DVD edition, so there's no problem... but certainly, at the same time, they had censored nearly all of the problem areas with a large number of ribbons and star symbols and such. I remember that on Nico Nico Douga, there were a lot of uploads of the unedited version of the transformation scene that was broadcast on TV Aichi¹⁸ and everyone made a big deal out of it."

"....."

¹⁸A TV channel... not that this needed a footnote, considering it was pretty obvious. However, TV Aichi is apparently rather notorious for airing unedited versions of anime, something that originated from their failure to censor the transformation scene from "Moetan," and their unedited version quickly went viral. It's gotten to the point that sometimes, "TV Aichi version" is used to imply an uncensored version of something. So, this allusion to TV Aichi is most likely a reference to this incident.

I wiped off the cold sweat that had poured out onto my forehead.

Why do I have to sit here and watch an elementary school student strip with my little sister's friend...?

I gazed at the living room door as if desperately searching for a way out.

But... the door showed no signs of opening at all.

... Dammit, not yet...? That asshole, just come already...

While I scowled, the music gradually became more and more exciting...

And then, the title of the show, Stardust ★ Witch Meruru, was displayed boldly on screen.

At that moment, I heard Kuroneko mumble vacantly.

“... And the first reason I won't like this anime...”

Meerumerumerumerumerumerume~ Meerumerumerumerumerumerume~

Glittering in the sky, it's a shooting star~? With a magical jet, it shoots the enemy~

From a land of magic, it falls and flow through the air. Konnichiwa~

Stardust Witch Meruru~!

“The theme song is absolute nonsense.”

“..... U.....gh.....”

I was aware that my face had gone pale. This definitely was... a bit difficult...

This probably had nothing to do with whether I was an otaku or not. I mean, Kuroneko looked like she was in pain as well.

“Heh~... well, let’s go play games, shall we? We can head to Kirino’s room...”

Reaching out for the remote control, I had my wrist caught by Kuroneko.

“... You wanted to experience the real Meruru, right? If you can’t even bear this much...”

“A-Ahh...”

Why the hell did I suggest we watch Meruru?!

As I listened to the seiyuu voicing the protagonist Kou Akaboshi Meru (Meruru) sing the theme song “Meteor ★ Impact,” I tried to deal with the immense amounts of embarrassment and regret I felt.

Shooting star~ Shooting star~ Diving into your chest with more power (sparkle! ★) than a meteorite (sparkle! ★)!

I’m aiming right for. your. heart~! With all my strength~! With my magic at full power~!

Don’t run away and take the blow~ ♡!

“Hey, just now when that brat was singing the chorus, she blasted the enemy away with a huge laser beam.”

“... In summary, she’s singing something like ‘From now I’ll send you my full strength full power¹⁹ magic at point blank range, so don’t run away!’ It’s a pretty disturbed anime.”

According to Kuroneko’s explanation, “Meteor Impact” seemed to be Meruru’s special move.

While in midair, she faced the enemy and spun into a dive, piercing the enemy’s heart with the front of her staff.

Like that, she flew through midair at high speed, and with the enemy still like that dragged him along the ground.

After that, she once again took to the skies, and swung her staff along with the enemy in a giant circle, and using the centrifugal force threw the enemy at the ground. And as the final blow, with a “Go! Meteor Impact~!!” she let loose a huge laser beam down to the ground.

“She’s letting loose that string of consecutive attacks with an innocent smile, this protagonist... it’s quite something that they can do these disgusting things while wearing the mask of being a ‘children’s anime.’”

... Well, it was certainly a harsher special move than those I’ve seen in crappy shounen manga.²⁰ The rival character she was fighting against in the opening was probably torn to pieces.

“I’ve noticed that lately, there have been too many products, and not just anime, in which loli and ero are pushed to the forefront. I understand that they’re just trying to sell what the market demands, but something that makes it so blatant like this turns me off. What the hell is with the ‘record breaking DVD sales’? Personally, I can’t help but lament the fact that we live in a world where only this kind of vulgar garbage sells. The general public really should cultivate a better sense of aesthetics.”

I didn’t say anything in response and remained silent, when...

¹⁹The phrase here is “zenryoku zenkai.” Methinks the Nanoha references could have been better disguised, Mr. Oreimo author.

²⁰Redundant! I kid, I kid, there are some shounen manga I have enjoyed.

“You really don’t know anything, do you?!”

With strength enough to kick down the door, someone entered the living room.

“K-Kirino...”

Even though I acted surprised to see her, I was really relieved.

A-Alright, everything seemed to have gone well...

In truth, when I had borrowed Meruru from Kirino, I told her this. “There’s a gift for you from Saori in the living room, so at least come down to get that,” I had said.

Remember, her stubbornness knows no bounds. If I tried to convince her to come downstairs in a straightforward way, she definitely wouldn’t listen.

I understood that all too well. But, if I watched her beloved Meruru with Kuroneko, and we talked about Meruru, I thought that maybe she wouldn’t be able to handle it and would barge in.

And it happened just as I had expected. Just look at how angry she is.

“Meruru is about friendship! Just because the Maschera DVD doesn’t sell as well, don’t just go off saying what you want and calling it disgusting! Hah, what the hell do you mean, ‘sense of aesthetics’? That arrogance... are you sure your vision hasn’t just gone blurry? Haha, leaving the cell phone novel aside, is your ‘sense of aesthetics’ just calling anything and everything you can’t understand garbage? Idiot, don’t act like some sort of expert if you can’t even see what the writers for Meruru were trying to do. And also, you shitty cat, exactly how far did you watch this series on your PSP? At least to the end of season one, right?!”

“What exactly did you come down here for? Nobody invited you.”

“Shut up! I came to get a drink when I heard someone say something I couldn’t forgive,

that's all! Well?! How far did you watch?!"

Kirino quickly lumbered over with heavy steps. Kuroneko watched the sudden intruder with cold eyes.

"Until the middle of episode six."

"Tch, why did you stop watching there?! That was a great part!"

"After her close friend was turned into a dark witch in part A because of an Evil Star parasite, Meruru showed her no mercy in part B and vaporized her, right? With Meteor Impact. For a while, I was planning to finish it out of a sense of duty, but as I predicted, I couldn't. Where exactly did you see 'friendship' in that story? If you think you can explain it, please impart your wisdom on me."

"Huh? What exactly were you watching? She had no choice but to do that. If she didn't, the earth would have been destroyed, and then Aru-chan would have definitely died!"

"So, that's why she shouldn't be going 'Go! Meteor Impact~!' all while smiling if she's facing her friend, right? She's nothing more than a pure psycho killer, this girl."

"But it was alright! Afterwards, she revived them! They were fighting in the 'magical field' that Meruru spread out before the battle, and in there she can revive anyone who died and repair anything that was broken after the fight!"

"What the hell is with that clichéd plot device? ... Even if I were to accept the argument that because that kind of magic was there, what she did was the best decision in that scenario, what was up with the fact that she showed no hesitation at all, and didn't shed a single tear? Is developing murderous instincts a side effect of using magic or something?"

"You're so annoying, going on and on and on and on and on about little details... it's fine, because in the end she was able to save her! And even Aru-chan in the end was like 'Thank you Meruru! You saved me!' right?!"

"And so as I was saying, after all, it's just a kid's anime. The portrayals of the characters

are severely lacking, and the plot development makes no sense.”

“Ah right, I forgot you were such a hard ass... but just tell me this. When she let loose her new special move, and was moving around with that godly artwork, didn’t you think that was awesome? Hm?”

“But she was letting loose that move against her close friend.”

“Ugh, you’re not listening!”

These anime otaku... they’re really annoying, aren’t they?!

As I was getting pretty fed up with everything, Kirino and Kuroneko once again erupted into a tumultuous verbal debate.

Suddenly, Kuroneko took the remote and paused the DVD playing on the television.

“Hmph... well, I can’t appreciate the godly artwork on a small screen, right? If that’s what you believe, then I never really watched it. So quickly, go get the disk that has episode six on it.”

She made that proposal belligerently, responding to Kirino’s anger with anger of her own.

“Ah, those were your words. Those were your words, right? Alright... I’ll bring it down right now.”

Kirino flatly thrust a finger at Kuroneko’s face.

“... Hah, I’ll definitely make you eat your words!”

After those words, Kirino ran up the stairs.

... Is she a child?

Geez... it was a bit early to let my guard down, but at this rate, it seemed that somehow, the anime appreciation event would actually happen. Facing the door my sister had just run out of, I sighed.

1.8 First Chapter Part Eight

In the end... just as we finished watching the sixth episode of Meruru, time ran out. The anime appreciation event had only lasted thirty minutes, but there was nothing I could do about that. It might have been better if I had gotten home a bit sooner though.

When it had gotten to five in the evening, Kuroneko announced that she was going back home. I didn't even have to ask why she needed to go home at that elementary-school-ish time.

Because at five thirty on Thursdays, both Meruru and Maschera aired on television.

By the way, while we were watching Meruru, the entiiiiire time, Kuroneko and Kirino were arguing back and forth like they always did. I couldn't really decide if they honestly disliked or liked each other, but I tried to calm them down, to coax them to play nice, to sweet-talk them, and in the process was slapped around, kicked, and abused... somehow or other without moving from my spot. Standing in the space between Kirino and Kuroneko, I succeeded in acting like a buffer zone between the two.

... I think you can guess from what has been happening up until now, but this was really difficult...

I seriously respect Saori for being able to do all this with a smile on her face. After all, it was like having to deal with two Kirinos. It was terrible. Honestly, I was relieved that it ended after thirty minutes.

“... Alright, I'll borrow this then.”

In the entranceway of the Kousaka house, Kuroneko was just about to leave while carrying a paper bag. In that paper bag was the DVD for “Stardust ★ Witch Meruru” that we didn’t have enough time to finish watching.

Kirino crossed her arms, and responded triumphantly.

“Fufuu, you seem to finally understand the true value of Meruru.”

“Don’t be an idiot, please. Certainly, I will admit that one part of the battle scene was pretty splendidly drawn, and I have to give the DVD version credit for fixing many of the artistic failings of the TV version... But my opinion that the scenario is crap has not changed... Hmph, I suppose it is at least good enough for me to watch it to the end out of obligation.”

“You’re still pretty stubborn aren’t you? You could just be honest with yourself and just say that you want to continue watching it because you liked it.”

She’s the last person who has the right to say that... I sent her a reproachful look.

Pulling myself together, I spoke to Kuroneko.

“... Thanks for coming over today to play with Kirino.”

I slackened my shoulders and curved the edges of my lips upwards.

“Feel free to come again any time. Let’s hold a proper anime appreciation event next time.”

Kuroneko stared me in the eyes.

“... Please just indulge my curiosity for a bit. This is a good opportunity to ask, but why exactly do you meddle so much in your sister’s business even though she treats you so badly?”

Indeed, why was that...? I didn't really know myself. At the beginning, I was just reacting to the situation... well, that was still somewhat true... but it wasn't just that anymore, I think. But I definitely didn't want to admit that.

In the end, I couldn't say anything but the following:

“... Sorry, but I don't really know either.”

“..... Siscon?”

“Definitely not!”

What are you saying?! There's no way that was true!!

After I denied her accusations with all my might, I felt someone kick my heel hard with her tiptoe.

“Ow... what the hell are you doing?!”

Turning back with an angry shout, I saw Kirino looking at me with a scornful stare.

“... Gross.”

... What the hell...?! I understand that you don't like anyone suggesting anything about siscon, but I wasn't the one who said it, and I denied the accusation! Don't just kick me like that so suddenly...

Watching me as I dealt with the pain, Kuroneko said one word.

“... Masochism?”

“Again, definitely not!”

“... Well, what then?”

Kuroneko tilted her head to one side. I didn't know why, but she didn't seem to want to let this topic go. She didn't look like she was going to stop with the questioning until I gave her a satisfactory answer.

I guess there's no choice...

Scratching my head, I tried to put this thing that I couldn't figure out how to say into words.

After knocking around a few words in my head... what came out of my mouth was honestly a terrible cliché.

“... Because we're siblings?”

I quickly averted my gaze and knocked myself on the forehead. Trying to hide my embarrassment, I clicked my tongue. This isn't good. Even though I was the one who said it, I knew that what I said didn't really amount to a good reason. Kuroneko wouldn't be satisfied with that answer either... or so I thought.

“... I see. I understand.”

Kuroneko gave me a light nod.

She then spoke in a gentle tone of voice that gradually sunk into my chest.

“... You're a good onii-san. I'm very jealous.”

She faced Kirino and whispered. Normally, I would expect Kirino to respond with something like “What is that supposed to be, sarcasm?” but Kirino just stood there with her arms crossed and frowned. It seemed like they were having some sort of silent exchange with each

other. I had no idea what was happening, so all I could do was keep watch.

For a little while, the silence persisted...

Until finally, Kirino haughtily scoffed. She looked at Kuroneko closely.

“Hm... what? You like these types of guys? You have bad taste.”

“.....”

At that statement, Kuroneko didn't make a move, but her eyes widened.

“You should heed my advice and not even think about it. After all, this guy is attracted to ugly people.”

“What the hell are you saying, asshole?! Who are you talking about?! Depending on your answer, I might really smack you!”

“Yeah yeah, don't take it so seriously. Sorryyy~~”

Kirino shrugged her shoulders as if making fun of me. T-This little...! Her attitude was just... ugh!

I started to voice my objections, but before I could Kirino faced Kuroneko and stuck out her chin.

“If you're really ok with him, I'll give him to you. In fact, he's gross, so just take him home with you.”

“Y-You little...”

As I clenched my fists tightly in anger, Kuroneko watched us intently from the side.

“... attracted to ugly people...”

She mumbled vacantly.

“.... Hm.”

Kuroneko seemed to have come to a cool understanding of the situation. Afterwards, Kuroneko sent Kirino a harsh stare.

“... Hah, please don't arrive at such a pointless misunderstanding... Males like him are not to my tastes either. There is a limit to how much you can joke about things, you know. There's no reason I would ever be attracted to a person who doesn't wear nekomimi. Please don't make fun of me, alright? This... male... he isn't attractive at all, he's incredibly plain, and he doesn't seem to be someone who's going to get ahead in life... he's a million miles away from my ideal... so I'll have to refuse your offer.”

How cruel... you really don't have to go that far...

After she had thoroughly thrown around her degrading comments, Kuroneko quickly turned the other way.

Like that, she quickly began to walk away. Watching her back as she left, I sighed.

“..... Hah.”

Her skin was pale white, and her black hair reminded me of something you would find on a Japanese doll. She had red contact lenses in her eyes, and underneath one there was a coquettish beauty mark.

A Gothic Lolita dressed in fluttering, frilly dress.

Her hobbies included cosplay, anime, games, as well as making doujinshi. Not only was

she expressionless and unsociable, when she opened her mouth all that came out of it was abuse.

She was absurdly difficult to hang out with, and incredibly troublesome to deal with.

But...

“... I’ll come again sometime.”

Occasionally, she had a cute side as well.

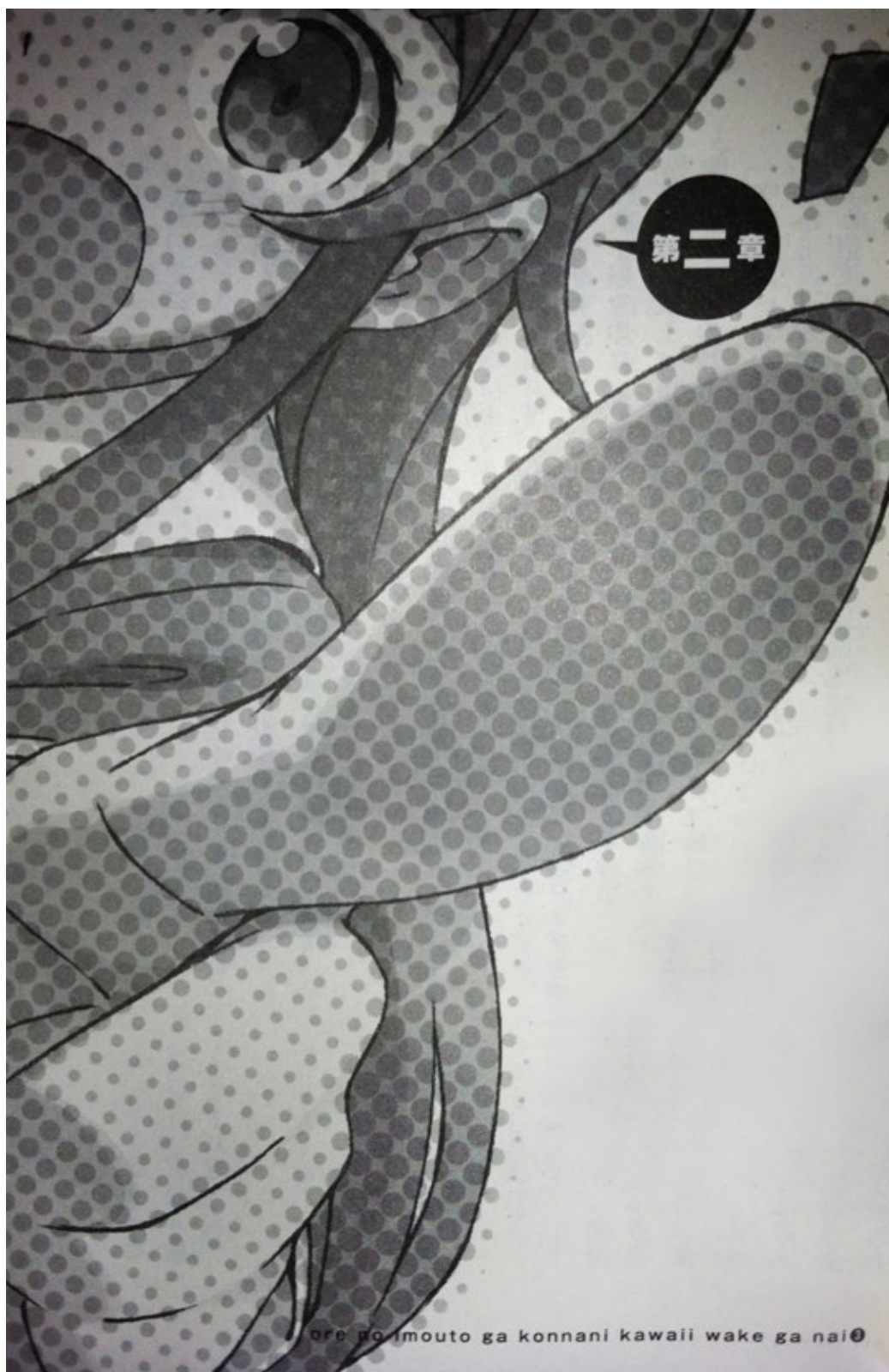
“Alright then.”

Giving a vague response, I turned back into the house.

Right there, my sister stood, still with her arms crossed...

And her tongue sticking out mockingly.

2 Second Chapter



2.1 Second Chapter Part One

“Halloween?”

It was after school on a Friday, sometime halfway into October.

Coming home from school as usual with Manami, I ended up visiting the Tamura Store on my way back.

The Tamura Store was the neighborhood traditional sweets shop, but it was also Manami’s home.

Right now, we were walking beside each other, headed towards that place.

“Yeah, Halloween. There’s going to be a ‘fair’ at my house starting tomorrow.”

Manami said the words with her standard, vaguely strange pronunciation.

Psychologically, she was identical to a grandma, so she was bad at pronouncing Western words.

“Hmm...”

Halloween, huh...?

In other words, just like the department store in front of the train station, it seemed that the Tamura household would also be putting on a Halloween fair.

“You’re a traditional sweets shop, and you’re celebrating Halloween? ... What’s up with that?”

“Ah, you’re making fun of me~. We definitely make candy that’s meant for Halloween too. To be honest, I called you to come with me today so we could maybe taste-test some of them.”

“Hm.”

“Hehe... they’re pretty amazing, so look forward to it~!”

I know I’ve already done this a countless number of times, but let me make the proper introductions. This seemingly air-headed girl’s name was Tamura Manami, and she was my childhood friend. Her bespectacled appearance lacked style, she was of average height, and was smart-ish²¹.

Putting her slight air-headedness aside, she was largely a very normal person. Her appearance and personality were in direct opposition to Kirino’s, which perhaps explains why I’ve always gotten along with her. Ever since we were kids, our constant relationship had neither soured nor developed into love, and persisted to this day.

If there was one thing worth mentioning about my absolutely average, unremarkable existence, it was probably this rare gem of a relationship with my childhood friend.

Heh, well... I guess my “amazing” little sister is also something that’s worth mentioning.

Chatting while we walked, we soon could see the Tamura house.

The Tamura house was a Japanese, old-style, bluish building. Honestly, it wouldn’t feel too out of place if it were placed in the middle of Edo Wonderland.

“I see, Halloween, huh?”

I paused for a moment, and stared at the decorations I was not used to seeing. There were many ghosts and Jack-O-Lanterns (pumpkin monsters) hanging in front of the store.

²¹More literally, she was “in the bottom of the ‘smart’ category.”

A contrast of orange and black. It was a marriage of Japanese and Western styles. The words “Tamura Store” were skillfully carved into a conspicuous wooden sign. If nothing other than the wooden sign were there, the shop would look everything like a respectable, well-established store, but with the department-store-like banner that declared “Tamura Store Halloween Fair, Starting Tomorrow!!” right next to it, the entire spectacle seemed strangely mismatched and surreal.

I was a bit worried, so I asked her directly.

“... Are people actually going to come for this?”

“T-They will~... definitely. We’re also holding events on the first day too.”

“Events?”

“We’ll call all the neighborhood elementary school students over and hold candy making demonstrations, and we’ll hand out candy, and all the shop employees will be in costumes.”

Costumes, huh...?

The word “cosplay” came to mind even though I had just learned that word not long ago, but I shook my head and dismissed the image.

“The shop employees, you said... you mean your obasan and ojisan, right?”

I could imagine that it would be a pleasant spectacle, but it really just seemed way too simple of a setup. They were also rounding up elementary school students... would that honestly work if they were trying to use this as a sales promotion?

“Ahh, tomorrow everyone in the family is helping out with the shop. So I’ll also be in a costume. As a w-witch...”

“Witch?!”

I couldn't stop myself from spurting that out.

I mean, her as a witch... the image didn't fit at all. The plain, bespectacled Manami as a witch... the only image that came to mind was a pitiful one of her trying to cast a spell and failing.

Now that I think about it, there was a similar plain-looking bespectacled mahou shoujo who showed up in "Stardust ★ Witch Meruru" (she had pink hair), and according to my sister, "It's pretty sad that it's always only her character goods that don't sell, so her goods have to be bundled with the goods of the other characters..." or something like that. That was pretty much the image I had of Manami right now.

A smile leaked out onto my face, and Manami, seemingly embarrassed, began to get angry.

"You're so meaaan... don't laugh like that... and also, you're imagining something strange, aren't you~?"

"I'm definitely not."

As she began hitting me with her book bag, I headed around towards the back entrance. Heading inside, I walked towards the living room as I always did, but the exact moment I opened the sliding door, the blood froze in my veins.

"Uwaah..?!" "Fueeeh...?!"

Standing in the entranceway leading to the living room, Manami and I froze with fear.

Lying on top of the tatami, Manami's grandfather was collapsed onto his face.

"Ojiichan!"

Manami's shout returned me to my right senses. Flustered, I rushed up to her grandfather.

Dammit! What exactly do you do at a time like this...?!

Let's try calling out to him first.

"Jiichan, are you alright?! Hey!"

No response. And what's more, his skin was terribly cold to the touch.

A shiver ran up my spine. Hesitating for only a moment, I tried taking his pulse.

... I really can't remember how. At the very least, the strong, steady rhythm I could feel when I took my own pulse... it wasn't there. Her grandfather's body was drained of all its strength, and even though he was skin and bones, he felt heavy.

"M-Manami, an ambulance! Call an ambulance!"

"Y-Yeah! A-Alright...!"

Manami stumbled away and ran out of the room.

If you had told me that something like this would happen before I had come here... as I thought deeply about the fragility of normal everyday life, I took her grandfather's body into my arms. That moment, I could barely stifle a shriek from coming out of my mouth.

Her grandfather's exposed face was ashen, and his cold, white eyes were opened wide.

"... Jiichan..."

My grief won over my fear, and tears welled up in my eyes. Feeling a presence behind me, I turned around and saw Manami's grandmother standing behind me.

“Ah, Kyou-chan. Welcome.”

Her gentle smile reminded me of Manami.

“Baachan... look at Jiichan...!”

As I called out to her, half in tears, Manami’s grandmother took a good look at Manami’s grandfather’s corpse, and gave a response of “ah, I see.”

“Ah, I see”? What was up with that light response?! This wasn’t a situation in which she should be responding like that!!

“He’s playing dead, isn’t he?”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeehhh?!?!?”

*Whoosh~!*²²

Opening my eyes wide, I quickly looked back and forth between Manami’s grandfather’s corpse and her grandmother.

Playing dead... but, this... he really seems completely dead here.

“Really? B-But, his body is so cold...”

“Ah. He was just in the store’s refrigerator nude for a while, so I thought his time had finally come... hmph, to think he was doing that just for the sake of pulling off this kind of prank...”

²²I have no idea what’s going on with this line. It reads as “Baba! Ba Ba!” It has to be an onomatopoeia of some kind but what the hell goes “Baba”? So I’m interpreting it as this because of the next line.

‘What a troubling man,’ she seemed to be thinking as she smiled.

But I was still not convinced.

“B-But he has no pulse!”

“He’s always had a weak pulse, this man.”

“B-But! ... Even then, this dead body stench... what about that?!”

“That’s just the smell of old age. Kyou-chan, try to remember. Our ojiisan has always smelled like this, right?”

“... Oogh, yes, certainly... but...”

Maybe it was because she saw that I was not going to budge from my position, but Manami’s grandmother put one hand to her cheek and seemed troubled.

“Well, I’ll just have to show you some proof, right?”

Saying that, she put her mouth to Manami’s grandfather’s ear.

“Ojiisan, ojiisan, if you don’t get up immediately, I’m going to pluck out your hairs one by one, alright?”

“Ooooooohhhh!!”

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

The response was dramatic. Manami’s grandfather jumped to his feet, obviously revived. Taken aback from seeing a dead body suddenly jumping up like that, I also couldn’t help but yell out.

“You scary witch of a woman! What are you planning to do with the little hair I have left?!”

Manami’s grandfather shouted with his white eyes opened wide.

H-He really was alive...

I’m the one who should be asking you what you were planning to do!! I thought my heart was going to stop!!

Manami’s grandmother ignored his complaint, and looked at me with one eye closed. “See? Like I said.”

Next, Manami’s grandfather also faced me with his white eyes still bare. Scary!

Her grandfather cheerfully raised one of his hands.

“Kyouchan, happy Halloween! Trick or... what was it?”

“How should I know?! Have your brains rotted away or something, you old man?!”

I couldn’t help but retort like that with all my strength.

2.2 Second Chapter Part Two

“T-Thank god... haah... ojiichan was alive...”

As soon as Manami returned to the living room, she repeated the same words over and over again, stroking down her chest in relief.

Manami had gone to call an ambulance, but right after what had happened I had chased after her and had explained the situation to her.

And we had both returned to the living room, which is where we were now.

“Ahah... sorry sorry, I was a bit too convincing back there ♡.”

With a teehee, he stuck out his tongue. It was very difficult for me to resist the urge to smack him.

... Geez, don't make your grandchildren cry like that...

“Well... jiichan, why exactly were you playing dead like that?”

“Eh? Oh, that? I was practicing my disguise for tomorrow's Halloween fair. Fufu... wasn't it amazing? My zombie costume.”

“Amazing... rather, it was a bit too real...”

If he played dead like that in the shop, I have no doubt that a customer would call the police or an ambulance! And what's more, he would come back to life after that right? The little kids they tried so hard to attract might honestly die from the shock.

And generally speaking, there aren't any zombies in stores that sell food.

“At any rate, I think that it's probably not a good idea to put on that little act in the shop.”

“... Do you really think so?”

Manami's grandfather looked pretty disappointed. *Swish*. He quickly turned his gaze on

his wife sitting next to him, as if to ask for her opinion, but when she cut him down quickly with a “it’s just as Kyou-chan says,” he looked truly crestfallen. In the end, he went and lay down in the corner.

“... Alright then. Whatever, it’s not like I care... heh, whatever...”

And he started sulking. He’s just like a child, isn’t he? Manami’s grandmother laughed.

“Kyou-chan, don’t mind him, alright? If you go over and try to cheer him up he’s just going to get cocky about it.”

“Roger.”

She was usually a kind person, but it seemed that she treated Manami’s grandfather pretty strictly.

Manami watched her grandparents’ exchange with a wry smile, but she soon stood up as if she had just thought of something.

“Ah, right. Kyou-chan, let me go and quickly get the Halloween candy.”

“Ah, sure.”

“... Fufu, then let me help as well...”

Manami and her grandmother left the room. Manami’s grandfather, having watched everything out of the corner of his eye, slowly got up and bitterly spoke.

“Hmph! Kyou-chan is pretty popular with old hags, isn’t he?!”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?!”

“Kakaka!”

Well, I mean... I have to admit he's charming in a way. Ever since I was a child, he's always been a great help to me... or I should rather say that he's been like a good friend to me, and I'm relatively fond of him.

Together with Manami's grandmother, I hoped they lived long lives.

And, after we had that little exchange, a new person came into the room.

“Oh! An-chan is here!”

“Ah, here I am.”

I faced him and raised a hand in greeting. It was Manami's younger brother, “Rock.”

His head was styled in a buzzcut, and he was short. He spoke in such an idiotically loud voice it was like he was shouting into a megaphone.

Rock was an embarrassing nickname he had given himself recently when he got carried away; it was his soul name.

Having called him by that name for around two months, we had both come to get used to it, so it was now here to stay. If a similar thing had happened at school, I would really pity him.

“... Well... umm... do your best, alright?”

“We just saw each other and you're already giving me sympathy?! Well! I don't know what you're talking about, but I'll do my best, An-chan!”

For as long as I can remember, he's fondly called me “An-chan”... well, I guess it's a very little-brother-like thing for him to do.

“By the way, what exactly do you have there?”

I pointed to the musical instrument Rock was carrying in his hand. When I said “what,” what I meant was “why do you have that instrument there?” Rock responded thusly:

“This? Heheeh, at tomorrow’s event I’m going to give a musical performance! Well, what do you think? It seems like I was put in charge of the music for tomorrow. In a word, I’m going to fire up Halloween with my live performance! I’ll put my soul into my music... or something like that! Haha, doesn’t that sound cool?”

Brrnggg. Rock strummed the instrument he was holding.

Even if you say something like you’re going to put your soul into your music... and putting aside whether you look cool or not...

I asked him the question that had been on my mind ever since I caught sight of him.

“... But, isn’t what you have there a shamisen?”²³

“... Hmph, a sharp retort, as expected from An-chan.”

Rock gazed off into the distance, and let out a self-derisive sigh. And then he appealed to me, half in tears.

“I can be completely honest with An-chan... I don’t have money so I can’t buy a guitar!! So... so! So anything was fine, I just wanted to play an instrument! So I begged my dad, you see. And then, he told me that grandma knew how to play a shamisen so I should learn from her.”

And that’s how it got to this, it seemed. It was a situation very befitting of a junior high

²³Three-stringed traditional Japanese instrument. Rock is obviously trying to pass it off as a guitar here, and also obviously failing.

school student. Also, his father... even if he said any instrument is fine, he obviously didn't mean that he wanted to play the shamisen, right?

Also, to think that having been told that, Rock actually went off and practiced playing the shamisen... that's also pretty amazing. What a strange father and son. Is everyone here just a huge airhead?

Grinning, I asked a question.

"Well? Can you play it now? Play a song for me."

"Ooohh!! Listen and be surprised!"

Rock set up the shamisen so nimbly that I could almost hear it ring. It really seemed like he had practiced quite a bit. He decided on a pose that made it look like he was playing the guitar.

Bnbnnn. Bnbnnnnnnnn...

With a stiff expression, Rock played the shamisen. It was really quite a surreal scene.

O-Ohh... amazing. That sounds pretty good...! I didn't have an ounce of knowledge when it came to shamisen music, but he definitely wasn't just playing around here... I could see that he was consciously and precisely producing sound from the instrument.

It was a song that made me envision the Heian period, with its nostalgic, sad, and gentle melody.

And somewhere, I could hear a hint of a flute...

Certainly, this was an appropriate tone for a traditional sweets shop.

But it didn't sound very Halloween-ey at all.

“Heh, how was it, An-chan?! Didn’t I just sound like John Frusciante?!”²⁴

“You sounded more like a Biwa priest.”²⁵

“Argh, jiichan told me the same thing!! I’m seriously hurt, you know!!”

I really said the same thing his grandfather did?! That seriously hurts.

But really, he’s playing the shamisen... so he doesn’t look like anything except the Marukome priest.²⁶

“Tch, this is why people with old sensibilities can’t understand the soul of the youth! It’s troubling, you know!”

Bnbnbnbnbnnn... Rock once again began his tasteful performance.

“Sorry to keep you waiting~.”

Saying that in a relaxed tone, Manami and her grandmother returned.

They were both holding trays of sweets and tea.

Right now, there were five people in this room: myself, Manami, her grandfather, her grandmother, and Rock.

By the way, when I came over to Manami’s house, I usually ended up drinking tea and

²⁴Guitarist. Used to play for the Red Hot Chili Peppers. I wonder what he would think if he knew he was being referenced in this LN hehe.

²⁵A priest during the Heian period, usually blind, who played the Biwa (Japanese lute) in the middle of town for a living.

²⁶I believe Marukome refers to a Japanese miso company, whose mascot looks like a little shaved-head boy priest thingymabobbers.

eating sweets with these same people.

Manami and her grandmother set the tea and sweets down on the low dining table.

Today's theme seemed to be Halloween candy... as was expected.

"Oh. These look great."

"Eheheh, right?"

Manami smiled broadly and I nodded.

There were a few types of sweets lined up on the table... but they all seemed like types of Halloween-themed traditional Japanese candy. For instance, there was a bite-sized Jack-o-Lantern. It seemed to be a candy that was made with Nerikiri²⁷ red bean paste. I don't know the exact name for it, but it's probably something everyone has eaten²⁸. Skilled Japanese confectionary artisans could make this Nerikiri paste into anything, so it was used often in decorative pieces... by the way, this is just personal experience, but working with the stuff was absurdly difficult. Using a spatula and mold to get them into the shape you want was pretty hard, but even making the Nerikiri properly was difficult for novices. From the point of view of an apprentice like me, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that how to handle bean paste was a trade secret.

Heh, I guess I got just a bit fired up there in my explanation... hm, I guess I can't complain about Kirino doing the same thing anymore...

"Kyou-chan, p-please... try one."

"Ah, alright, then I won't hold back..."

I took one of the Nerikiri Jack-o-Lanterns and popped it into my mouth.

²⁷This appears to be some sort of Japanese sweets-making ingredient that can be molded into shapes.

²⁸Uhhhhhhhhh...

“This is great!”

“Really?!”

Manami’s expression suddenly brightened, and she joined her hands together in front of her chest.

I took a mouthful of tea.

“Really really! And it’s filled with pumpkin bean paste, right?! This is quite a piece of art! And then, what’s that? Seeds?”

“Yeah... pumpkin seeds.”

“Using seeds to decorate the head... pretty amazing.”

I was seriously impressed.

And what’s more, each and every Jack-o-Lantern had a different facial expression. Only hand-made things could taste like this. Besides that, there were various ghosts, witches, bats, black cats... etc. etc.

They were all small and cute, so they would probably be very popular with the young girls that formed the majority of the Tamura Shop’s customer base. They were indeed quite intricate, and I’m sure a lot of thought went into them.

I looked at Manami and asked.

“Did you make this?”

“U-Umm... why?”

I mean, because you were so interested in my opinion about them earlier...

And I was the first one you tried to feed one of these to, and when I said how good they were, you seemed really happy. And your facial muscles all softened like that... anyone would be able to guess that you had made these.

For a while, Manami squirmed around as if she were embarrassed and didn't know what to do.

Finally, she gave me a deep nod.

"... Yeah. I made them. I'm glad... that you like them."

"..... Ah."

The atmosphere in the room strangely took a turn for the awkward, so I also began to squirm bashfully. If Kirino were here, she probably would think this was pretty "gross"... but it's not like I can help it...

Manami's grandfather, staring at us all this while, spoke through a mouthful of pumpkin bean paste dorayaki.²⁹

"You two, hurry up and get married."

"Mrrphhhh...?!"

I almost spurted out my tea.

"O-Ojiiichan!!"

²⁹ "Japanese dessert consisting of two slices of sponge cake with red bean jam in between."

Unusual for her, Manami raised her voice, but she got no sympathy from the people around her.

“Ojiisan does occasionally speak sensibly, doesn’t he?”

Manami’s grandmother chuckled and sipped her tea.

It’s troubling to say that these two would try to get me and Manami together whenever they had a chance. This is how it’s been for quite a few years now, so it’s not like I get annoyed about it anymore...

But getting ambushed like this about it, I couldn’t help but be affected...

... G-Geez... I’m really not good with this kind of atmosphere...

Manami seemed to feel the same way, and appeared to have decided on escaping from the living room.

“U-Ughh....!! I don’t care what you two say anymore! K-Kyou-chan... let’s go to my room.”

“A-Ahh.”

I gave a response and stood up. Hearing the mocking chuckles of Manami’s grandfather behind me, I followed Manami and left the room.

Walking a bit down the hallway, we ascended a narrow, steep set of stairs. I have to say, I didn’t dislike these creaky old stairs. I wonder why... I guess the sound of the creaking put my mind at ease for some strange reason.

Right after going up the stairs, we arrived at a sliding screen door that led to Manami’s room.

“H-Hold on a second...”

“Alright.”

Manami slid the door open a teeny bit, and slipped inside through the crack.

She probably wanted to tidy up a bit before letting me in. Putting away ero books that might be lying out in the open... well, that would be my case, but I'm sure Manami also had things that she wasn't keen on me seeing.

I really don't think she actually was hiding something dreadful from me like Kirino had been.

But..... Now that I think about it, it's certainly been a while since I've gone into Manami's room.

Nevertheless, it's not like I feel nervous about this or anything.

Right then, the sliding door opened, and Manami poked her head out.

“P-Please come in.”

“Ahh... sorry for intruding.”

With that, I stepped foot into Manami's room.

The room smelled like grass and incense, had tatami for flooring, and was six tatami large. There were large windows not only in the room, but also on the side of the hallway, so there was great sun exposure in here. Almost-dazzling sunlight flooded the room, warming both my body and soul.

Even though this was also a girl's room, it felt completely different from my sister's room. How should I put it... I've probably used this phrase many times up until now, but if you can

imagine that the room looked like a “grandmother’s room,” you probably wouldn’t be too far off the mark.

There wasn’t much furniture; it was basically empty. There were a few drawers and cabinets, a three-sided mirror (I guess in the West you would call this a “dresser”), and a low dining table... that’s all there really was. Lined up in the corner of the room were the only somewhat girl-like things in the room: a collection of colorful cushions and stuffed animals.

But, what left the strongest impression on me about the room were things like the jar that she used for God knows what, the hanging scroll style calendar, the framed ukiyo-e-like³⁰ painting... it reeked of old woman.

“... Well, this place sure hasn’t changed.”

“... Don’t look so closely around like thaat... it’s embarrassiing~...”

What exactly about this jar or this hanging scroll was there to be embarrassed about?

I don’t understand women at all...

Casually sitting down, I stretched out my legs and made myself comfortable.

Around a foot³¹ away from me, Manami also sat down. She spoke with a strangely impatient tone of voice.

“U-Umm... what should we do?”

“Sleep.”

“Ehhh?!”

³⁰A type of traditional Japanese woodblock print art.

³¹He says they’re separated by the lengths of around “two clenched fists.” So I approximated that.

Manami seemed excessively surprised.

“S-Sleep...?!”

...? What is she surprised about?

“Lately I’ve been staying up late quite often... well... and I just wanted to lie down and take it easy for a bit. At least now that I’m here.”

“A-Ahh..... Hah.”

When Manami cleared up whatever misunderstanding she had fallen into, she sighed and for some reason seemed relieved. What just happened? I really don’t understand this girl...

I lay back and stared up at the ceiling.

“By the way, I left all my reference books at school, so I’m definitely not going to study.”

“I wasn’t going to suggest that... ugh.”

For a little while, Manami glared at me, but soon she let out a smile.

“You’re right... let’s just take it easy.”

“... Mm.”

And that’s why...

We ended up just lazing around. I don’t know what that means to other people, but for us, “lazing around” meant just what it sounded like.

“Ah, right... do you want some tea?”

“Mm.”

And we drank some tea.

“.....”

“....”

Time passed hazily.

“..... Ahh.”

And we yawned some.

“By the way, don’t you have to prepare for Halloween?”

“I do... but after the shop closes.”

“Hm.”

“Tonight, we’re all going to try our best.”

“Well, I’ll help then.”

“Really? You might be able to help out a lot... there’s a lot of physical work to be done. And lately ojii-chan’s back has been hurting... but, are you sure? You’re tired, aren’t you?”

“I already said it was fine, didn’t I? Don’t worry about it.”

“Thanks... well, it’s not like this is payment or something, but please eat dinner here too.”

And we talked idly.

We weren’t trying to do anything in particular, but just spent our time relaxed.

“.....”

Next year, I would be preparing to take entrance exams. And what I was doing now was probably a waste of time. But at the same time, I cherished this time I’m wasting. My view of life was being able to see value in these types of excess.

Now that I think about it, this way of thinking was probably in agreement with the otaku lifestyle.

Take games, or manga, or anime. No matter what types of things they sought out, they were not things that could be helpful to society. They spent their precious time idling away with unproductive foolishness.

But, perhaps precisely for that reason, there was a unique value in spending time that way, and perhaps this was why so many people were so crazed about these things. It wasn’t something to be looked down on.

“Kyou-chan... what are you thinking about?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Hm?”

Kneeling and relaxed, Manami poured out some tea.

For no particular reason, I found myself staring at her from the side.

“Ah, the tea stalk is floating.”³²

“Ooh, wow.”

I’m being serious.

It really, really wasn’t something to be looked down on.

2.3 Second Chapter Part Three

A few hours later...

While the women prepared dinner, I cleaned up the shop with Rock and also helped prepare for the following day. We had already pretty much finished cleaning the store, so there was only one thing left to do.

“Gwahh... heavy...!”

From the back of a truck, we had to take some materials to a separate refrigerated room located at the back side of the store.

People who have worked part-time for a sweets store can probably empathize, but the bags they used for business were all excessively heavy.

... My arms are probably going to be feeling this tomorrow.

³²A sign of good luck.

Manami's father had already gladly accepted my offer to help. Or should I rather say, the minute he saw me his face lit up, as if he was planning on getting me to help out even if I hadn't asked in the first place. As far as I could remember, this man never had any reservations about putting me to work. Well, that's fine. This way, I don't have to worry either.

"That was the last one... phew."

I wiped off my sweat with the towel I had around my neck. I was inside the refrigerated room, so I could see my breath in front of me.

Leaving the refrigerated room and going out into the yard, I saw an apron-wearing Manami waiting for me.

"Thanks for your hard work today, Kyou-chan."

"Ahh... phew, I'm really tired."

Manami chuckled at my frank confession.

"You really helped us out by being here today. Seriously, thank you... I worked really hard on making dinner, so be sure to eat a lot, alright?"

"Ahh."

"Do you want to eat first? Or do you want to take a bath first?"

"You went through all that trouble of making the meal, so I think I'll eat first. Umm, by the way, bath?"

"Yeah... umm... dad said that because Kyou-chan came all the way to visit today, he should spend the night... i-it's because dad said so!"

"You don't need to clarify like that... I understand."

She wasn't Kirino, but this girl also occasionally took an attitude I couldn't comprehend...

I responded without hesitation.

"Alright, I'll stay the night then."

"Ahh... are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure... I'm fine with it. I'll call my parents and tell them... at any rate, we don't have school tomorrow."

Even though she had been the one who asked me... when I agreed to her proposal matter-of-factly, Manami gave me a broad grin. Her expression softened to a point that was difficult to describe.

"Hehe... That makes me happy. It's been such a long time since you've stayed over."

"I guess so. We used to go back and forth between each other's houses so often a long time ago too... but at some point we stopped. I wonder why?"

"Eh? Hmmm... I wonder why..."

We exchanged glances. Thinking about it once again, I couldn't come up with a reason.

... I guess that's just how it was. That's generally how to describe it when people's relationships changed.

"Yeah. Could it be... Kyou-chan is in high school and an adult now, so he gets nervous when he stays over at a girl's house?"

Her words reminded me of something an old lady in my family might say. I couldn't feel

a shred of youth in how she was talking.

“Why would I get nervous going over to your house at this point?”

“Eh? You’re not?”

“I’m not.”

Why does she seem a bit unsatisfied with that answer?

“In fact, I feel like I can relax more here than in my own home.”

At any rate, my little sister wasn’t here...

At my words, the previously unsatisfied Manami reversed her attitude.

“... I see,” she said with a smile.

“Hm? ... Do you have something you want to say or something?”

“Hmm...? I was just thinking if it would be better that way...”

In the end, I really had no idea what she was talking about.

2.4 Second Chapter Part Four

On our way to the living room, Manami and I bumped into her grandfather who had just gotten out of the bathtub.

“Thanks for your hard work! As a reward, you have the privilege of taking a bath with Manami!”

Shut up, you. Don’t be wandering around your granddaughter with just a towel on.

“S-Sorry... Kyou-chan. Ugh... everyone is just so...”

“Nah, no problem. I’m used to it. It doesn’t bother me at all.”

When I responded curtly, Manami for some reason seemed to pout a little.

“... Hmph, it doesn’t bother you at all...?” she went, her lips thinning.

And then... a not particularly eventful dinner passed by.

Right now, everyone was resting after their meal.

A variety show was on television, and every time the comedian on screen told a joke, Rock guffawed and clapped his hands. It seemed to be pretty easy to get him to laugh.

If everyone were like him, performers would probably have a much more fun time with their jobs.

Sitting next to him and watching the same show, I almost wanted to smack him on the back of the head and tell him to shut it.

Rock was being loud and seemed to be completely focused on the program, so I lost interest in the television, when suddenly I felt someone’s stare on the side of my face.

“Hm?”

Turning in that direction, I happened to make eye contact with Manami, who had been

looking at me.

We stared at each other with a table between us.

“..... Jiii.”³³

Speaking only in mimetic words, Manami stared at me as if she wanted to say something.

“... W-What is it?”

Faltering a bit, I questioned her.

But Manami seemed to be signaling “you should know what!” and didn’t break her silence.

“... Jiii.”

“.....”

We began our little staring contest. The first person to avert their gaze would be the loser.

But I couldn’t think of one instance when I had won a competition like this before.

“.....”

In just a few moments, I couldn’t take it anymore and averted my gaze. I had announced my surrender.

But I probably could guess from the very beginning what she was trying to get me to say.

³³This is just a guess, but “jiii” tends to be something someone says when they are staring intently at someone else. I have no idea how to translate this into English, so I’m leaving it like this.

Umm... it's probably... I had complimented her on her Halloween candies earlier... so she's hoping for more?

“Ah... about the meal tonight... it was great.”

“Ehehe... thanks. That makes me happy.”

Even though she all but forced me to say it, Manami seemed very happy and her eyes sparkled.³⁴

To me, there was nothing more awkward than situations like this. And to my great annoyance, she seemed to take pleasure in making me blush like this.

Then again, I also took pleasure in annoying Manami... so I really shouldn't be talking here...

“H-Hey, isn't it about time your father got out of the tub?”

“Mm, I guess so.”

When I tried to change the subject, Manami glanced up at the clock in the room and put a finger to her lips.

As always, her posture was almost perfect³⁵. Almost to the point where I was fascinated by her.

Her looks were completely average, but this part of her was nice.

“Do you want to go next?”

³⁴It says her eyes “thinned in happiness,” which is weird for English, since thinning of eyes is usually associated with annoyance.

³⁵Manami is kneeling in a traditional Japanese way. Back straight, hands on lap, I think.

“I’m fine with going last.”

It’d be rude to go in before everyone in the family had gone.

“I’m fine with going after Kyou-chan, you know?”

Manami encouraged me to go take a bath.

“Nah, you go first.”

“You don’t have to be so restrained here, you know? Kyou-chan, please, go first, go.”

These types of exchanges were repeated several more times...

At last, Manami seemed to suddenly have thought of something.

She clapped her hands lightly.

“Well then.”

“... W-What?”

She quickly leaned forwards, and her head drew near to mine. With a mischievous expression, she softly whispered into my ear.

“... I guess we really should go in together?”

“...?!”

It was a trick to make me feel embarrassed... I knew that it was a joke!

But, in my carelessness, I was disturbed by her statement.

“Ugh...”

After I bit my bottom lip and calmed my heart, Rock swung his head in our direction from his position lying on the floor watching the TV. Traces of his laughter were still lingering on his face.

“Hey, hey. What kind of secret talk are you two doing?”

“Shut up! Go watch the damn television!”

“Ahaha. Kyou-chan, your face, it’s completely red.”

“Gngg...!”

This was so frustrating. Dammit, even though it was Manami... she was getting pretty cocky...

She seemed strangely confident when she was in her own house. “Home Field Advantage Manami,” I should call her.

Keh, whoever ends up marrying you, after the marriage is official and he understands what the reality of the situation is, he’s going to be tortured day after day by your embarrassing statements. Don’t be surprised when he dies in agony from embarrassment.

Hmph... don’t think that I’m the same person I used to be though. These few months, I’ve come into contact with my sister and her friends, and I’ve contracted a nasty disease. You don’t know, do you, the ultimate power that idiots can summon when they’re cornered...?! Well, listen up...!



“Alrighty then, let’s go in together!”

“H-Hueeeeeeeeeehhh?!”

My do-or-die counterattack took its effect, and the triumphant Manami’s face suddenly boiled red.

“S-Seriously?”

“Absolutely seriously! You’re the one who invited me, so don’t back out now!”

Standing up vigorously, I made my declaration with my fists clenched.

Seeing me do that, Rock also became extremely excited.

“Uooh!! An-chan’s acting so cool?! As expected from a man like him!!”

Indeed, indeed. I’d certainly expect you to understand. After all, you’re an idiot.

Having transformed into the manliest of men, I grabbed two bath towels and two changes of clothes, and made a further declaration.

“Come now, Manami! Let us go quickly! To the place where we will take our bath! I will show you my hyper weapon!”³⁶

It seemed to be a bad habit of mine lately to not be able to stop once I really got going like this.

“W-Wah...”

³⁶After much tireless Googling, I found this to be a reference to Rance Quest, an eroge by AliceSoft. It’s the nickname the protagonist has for his penis. What the hell, Kyouzuke, how do you know that reference in the first place?

With both her eyes as wide as dinner plates, Manami flushed a brilliant red and fiddled with her hands.

Hah... serves you right! Now you regret saying that, don't you!

But I really might have gone too far. Feeling a bit embarrassed myself, I began to tell Manami that it was all a joke, but...

At that time, Manami's quivering lips began to move purposefully...

"O-Obachan! What should I do?! Kyou-chan asked me to take a bath with him!!"

"Don't go telling your grandma!!"

2.5 Second Chapter Part Five

I was expecting to die once I returned to my senses, but in the end, I took a bath after Manami's father finished. I should probably mention this just in case, but of course, I went in alone.

The Tamura household's bathroom was an incredibly average bathroom, and had both a bathtub and a place to rinse off.

In the bathtub floated some Japanese iris. The Japanese iris season had already passed long ago, but considering how the bath water felt like it had a lot of things added to it, it was clear that this family customarily threw lots of things into the bath.

That's why if you lived with this family long enough, you would naturally become pretty knowledgeable about those kinds of things.

So, this was a Japanese iris bath. They had used high quality Japanese iris, and it was a bath that relaxed my nerves and lower back.

... Although... I was probably a little too young to appreciate that relaxation...

Hmm... but just the pleasant smell alone was good enough.

The refreshing fragrance and the steam...

It wasn't bad at all.

It was a rather cramped bath in a rather average household, but it had a certain air of elegance to it.

I quickly washed my body, and rinsed the bubbles off in the shower.

And then finally, with great anticipation, I stuck a leg into the Japanese iris bath...

“Hot!!”

O-Oh right... I had completely forgotten.

In this house, they always used boiling water in their bath. Ugh, this is why old people are so...

Although I was cursing on the inside, I thought about the two grandmas³⁷ who would be getting in afterwards, and hesitated to pour cold water into the bath to cool it off.... I guess I'll just do my best to tolerate it.

“Agh, Hooooooooott!!!”

³⁷I believe the emphasis here suggests that he is including Manami in this description.

Plunging into the bathtub in one go up to my shoulder, I shut my eyes tightly. The tingling, burning sensation on my skin slowly subsided, and then gradually turned into pleasure.

“Oooooohh...”

I was warmed right down to my core. Soaking slowly in warm water was good, but this type of hot bath had its own appeal. I rested the back of my head on the edge of the bathtub, and let out a long sigh.

“Alright... so, what’s going to happen tomorrow?”

Manami had said that she was going to help with the Halloween event or whatever... So I guess I would do that too.

For the time being, I would see this event through to the end.

I was also looking forward to seeing what kind of plain witch that girl would make.

Also, it’s not like I hated helping out here at this store. How do I put it... working hard and dripping with sweat was just an activity that seemed to agree with me. Finishing work and soaking in a hot tub like this gave me a feeling of satisfaction that was difficult to replace with anything else.... Heh, sorry if I come off as too plain for you.

Also, it seemed that this weekend was shaping up to be not bad at all.

“... And I won’t have to come face to face with a certain annoying somebody either.”³⁸

A smile spontaneously broke out across my face.

Like that, as I soaked pleasantly in the tub...

³⁸Fun for you. Not fun for us readers.

Rustle rustle. I heard the rustling of clothes.

Hm? Is someone in the changing room?

I could see a silhouette on the other side of the steam-obscured glass. The person... seemed to be undressing...

..... Huh? Wha-... eh...?

“W-Wah... don’t tell me she seriously is...!”

Rustle rustle rustle. As I became more and more disturbed, I stared at the changing room.

Is she an idiot?! Did she really take the joke that seriously?!

Uwaah... what should I do? I-If this were an eroge, this would probably lead to an event CG...!³⁹

I tightly grasped the edge of the tub. I-I mean, it’s not like I’m nervous or something.

F-For now, I should probably wrap myself in a towel at least.

The instant I began to move to do that, the door to the changing room opened.

Gaaaaa.

“Yooo! An-chan, let me wash your back!”

“It was you?!”

³⁹For all the hate Kyousuke dumps on eroge, he sure seems to like making analogies to them a lot.

I threw the wash basin at the intruder. *Bang!* It hit the Marukome priest right on.

“Agh, ow!!”

It’s probably not necessary to mention that the boy who had bent backwards from taking my attack was Rock.

Hah, so that’s how it is... that’s how it is... I had thought it would turn out to be something like this...

“... D-Don’t screw with me! You... You... Do you have any idea what you did?!”

“A-An-chan, why are you half-crying and getting so angry so suddenly?!”

As if I know!!

2.6 Second Chapter Part Six

After getting out of the bath and getting comfy again in the living room, I saw Manami’s grandmother coming into the room.

“Kyou-chan, I laid out your futon for you in the usual room.”

“Ah, thanks.”

The “usual room” was the room I always used when I came over to this house to stay over. Good service here, isn’t it? Even though, if she had just put the futon in the room, I would have gladly spread it out myself.

Both my grandmothers had passed away, so faced with this person's kindness, I couldn't help but feel strangely warm inside...

"Ah, is it already this late...?"

Looking up at the clock, I saw that it was around ten. Perhaps it was because they had to worry about the shop, but the Tamura household went to bed early. I should probably also retire to my room soon.

"I'm going to go to sleep soon."

"Ah, well, then I'll go back to my room too..."

Following me, Manami also stood up. By the way, at this point we had both already changed into our pajamas.

(I think the ones I was wearing belonged to her father). A little while ago, Manami had just gotten out of the tub. She didn't have her glasses on and her hair was still slightly wet.

"Ehehe... being together here with each other just before going to sleep... how long has it been?"

"... Hmm. Probably around four years, I would say."

We talked as we walked down the hallway. Manami took the lead and went up the stairs.

"You look a bit unsteady there. You alright?"

"Ah, yeah... I just got out of the bath and I don't have my glasses on..."

"Hm, I see."

This was sort of dangerous. Preparing myself to support her just in case she fell, I ascended to the second floor.

The closest sliding door led to Manami's room. My room was the third sliding door.

"Well... good night."

"... Ah, g'night."

Seeing Manami off into her room, I slid open the door to my own room.

Garaa.

"Gah-"

Suddenly, the breath caught in my throat. The futon that Manami's grandmother had laid out for me was there. Except, there were two.

A pair of futons were very neatly laid out next to each other. A so-called "husband and wife" arrangement.

W-What the hell is this?! W-What-

"What's wrong?"

"Ehh?!"

When I looked back, Manami was right behind me.

"W-Why are you here?!"

“Y-You don’t have to be that surprised... Uhh, well, for some reason, my futon disappeared... I went back into the hallway to figure out what was going on and I saw you standing so stiffly over here... umm, is there something interesting in the room?”

“Don’t look! Don’t look in the room!!”

My warning didn’t seem to make it to her in time, and behind me, Manami also peeked into the room.

“... Eeehhh?!”

And she also stiffened. Her body seeming to convulse, Manami pointed at the two futons.

“W-What is that supposed to be?! T-That... that’s my futon, isn’t it?”

“... That... appears to be the case.”

I nodded solemnly. Manami raised her voice.

“Did you lay these out?! You wanted to sleep next to me?!”

“N-N-N-N-No!!! What the hell are you saying?! A-Are you an idiot?! Who would do something like... don’t come to such a strange misunderstanding!”

Having been completely shaken, we began to act rather dodgily. We had even forgotten the events from a few minutes ago.

“B-But but! Look at how they’re right next to each other! It looks like something a newlywed couple would use!”

“F-For now let’s just calm down! C-C-Calm down and let’s figure out what’s going on! Mm, yes, there’s no mistaking it, this is my doing...!”

“Kyou-chan, calm down! There’s so much that doesn’t make sense with that!”

“Ugh..! To think that the day would come when *you* would be the one retorting against *me*...!”

I mean...

It’s not like I had to calm down and think about it calmly to realize that this was her grandmother’s doing.

..... That old hag..... With her “Kyou-chan, I laid out your futon for you in the usual room”... putting on such a kind expression but then going and doing something so unnecessary like this...!

“... Hah. Well, for now, shall we put the futon back where it belongs?”

“Eh? We’re putting it back?”

“That’s obvious, isn’t it?! What’s up with that surprised expression?!”

“I don’t mind... even like this... it’s fine...”

“We’re putting it back.”

Flatly cutting down that inappropriate line of thought, I began to pick up Manami’s futon.

However, at that time, I heard an anguished “Guooh!!” from behind me.

“W-What?!”

When I turned around, I saw Manami’s grandfather crouching in the hallway, grasping his

chest.

He was mumbling something like “the futon... the futon...”

Manami hurriedly rushed to his side.

“Ojiichan! Are you alright?!”

“A-Ahh... I’m alright. No need to worry... It’s just that when I saw Kyou-chan trying to carry the futon, it triggered some wartime trauma for me and I had a few heart spasms.”

“.....”

What the hell was up with that outrageously specific trigger? He’s joking, right? Exactly what in the world happened to him during the war?

Also, gramps, you were hiding and watching us, weren’t you? Otherwise, you wouldn’t have been able to time this so well.

As I thought, you’re an accomplice to this crime.

Her grandfather spoke with an exaggerated expression.

“If you don’t line those two futons up by each other, I will be killed by the pumpkin’s curse.”

He’s just saying whatever the hell he wants...

My eyes half closed, I glanced at Manami’s grandfather, and once again picked up the futon.

“Ugooh?! Gyoeeeeeeeeeehhhhhhhh...?!”

..... Let's try putting the futon down then.

“... Haah, haah, haah... T-That was close. I barely escaped death that time. I saw baasan on the other side of the Sanzu River⁴⁰ beckoning me.”

“... Baachan is downstairs watching television, isn't she?”

Hey gramps, there's a limit to how bad your acting can be, you know... feeling blood vessels popping on my forehead, I once again picked up the futon. As expected, her grandfather once again grabbed his chest.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh...! Uwaaaaaaah...?!?”

“Daaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh! Alright! Alright, I got it, so cut it out!”

Cough, cough. “... Really?”

Don't look at me with upturned eyes like that! It was disgusting how much each and every one of his actions reminded me of things Manami would do!

Completely stunned, I could do nothing but nod. He was a terrible actor, but if I made him go through that act a few more times, he seriously might die.

“Ah, ahh... she can sleep here. It's not like it's a bit deal... right?”

Looking to Manami for confirmation, I saw her gently return a smile.

“Yeah, I'm fine with it... if even Kyou-chan is fine with it...”

⁴⁰This is essentially the Japanese equivalent to the River Styx.

How should I put it... it was an incredibly ordinary response.

W-Well... it's not like I didn't know she would respond that way...

Hey, Manami. If you make such lackadaisical responses to other guys, I'm absolutely certain they would misunderstand.

2.7 Second Chapter Part Seven

And for that reason... in the end, I ended up sleeping lined up with Manami in the same room.

Of course, we jerked the futons apart so they wouldn't look like they had been arranged for a married couple.

"It feels like... we're kids again, doesn't it...?"

"... Now that you mention it, it does seem that we always slept like this next to each other back when we used to stay over at each other's houses."

"Yeah... to think that we would be sleeping together like this again even though we're much older... I never would have guessed something like this would happen."

Both lying down, we exchanged glances and smiled wryly.

If I gave her the benefit of the doubt, Manami's grandmother might have laid these futons out like this for no other reason than because we used to sleep like this.

Although, there was no room to doubt that her grandfather was not nearly as innocent.

Well, it's not a big deal. If it were any other girl, there would be a lot more to be concerned

about, but this is Manami we're talking about. This felt more like I was spending the night with family... there was absolutely no need to be nervous or self-conscious. Really.

"... I'm going to sleep now. Good night."

"Mm... Good night, Kyou-chan."

I turned off the lights and shut my eyes. In the silence, only the regular ticks of the clock echoed through the room.

One minute, ten minutes... probably more than that passed. My consciousness of the time passing faded away...

"... Kyou-chan. Are you... still awake?"

Manami muttered into the silent room.

"... I'm still awake."

After I responded like that, there was a period of silence, and then...

"... Umm... it would be nice if we could go to the same college, wouldn't it?"

Hey hey. Why are you bringing that up now...? Haha...

I managed to keep myself from responding in an overly surprised manner.

"... Yeah, it would be."

I responded.

It didn't matter if we were talking about unnecessary or meaningless things right now. That's what I thought.

So I also started speaking aimlessly.

"If after we graduate from high school, we go to the same college... I wonder what would happen then."

It was a very vague question. But at the same time, it was also something I always thought about.

It's not like I was expecting an answer. It wasn't a question that had any particular aim, after all.

Manami seemed to be thinking about it for a little while.

"Probably... not much would change, I think."

On one hand, her response was noncommittal and vague... it was a carefree response I would expect from her.

But, in a way, it was also the response I was looking for.

"Ah, maybe."

When she told me that, "yeah, maybe" is what came to mind. After we graduate from high school, start attending college, many things would change. But at the same time, there would be many things that would not change.

"... Heh, I feel that even when we're graduating from college, you would say the same thing."

I smiled wryly. Glancing next to me, I saw Manami blinking with surprise. But then, she

smiled.

“Mm... I guess so... I’ll be saying the same thing forever, won’t I...?”

I wonder how far into the future she’s envisioning... but her tone of voice was soft.

For some reason, her words left a strong impression on me. They were reassuring, I think.

.....

We both once again fell into silence. Manami was the first to break the comfortable silence.

“... Back in the day, we used to always go to each other’s houses, and stay over... like this, didn’t we?”

“...?”

I felt like we had talked about a similar topic already.

“But recently we haven’t... I mean... so...”

What exactly is so hard for her to say here?

Manami seemed to be searching for the right words for a while, but at last...

“... Sorry. It was nothing.”

And she pulled her blanket up to her mouth.

I watched the situation in front of my eyes...

“Well, next time, want to come over to my house?”

I suddenly said that. I remembered that it had been quite a while since Manami had been over to my house.

Girls were creatures that never directly said what they wanted. That was a fact that I had come to have quite a bit of first-hand experience with lately. Thanks to a certain someone.

So this was something that the old me would never have said.

Do you want to come over to my house next time? Having been asked that, Manami seemed very surprised and opened her eyes wide, blinking rapidly. Next, with her mouth still hidden under her blanket, she nodded.

“Umm... yeah... I’d like to go.”

I couldn’t see the look on her face because it was hidden under the futon.

But just by the happily thinned shape of her eyes, I didn’t need to see the rest of her to know.

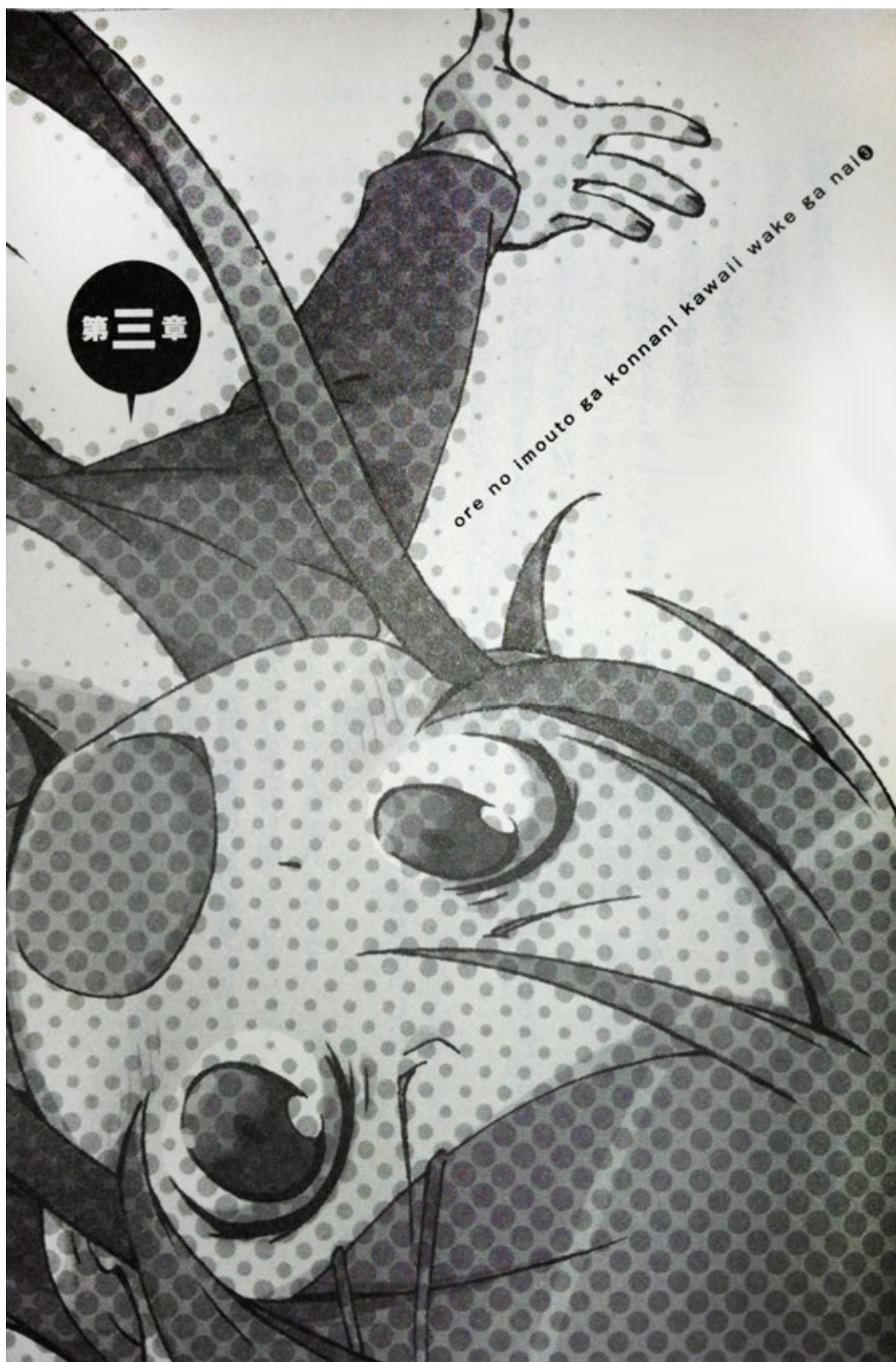
I had a certain someone to thank for being able to draw this happiness out of my reticent, reserved childhood friend. For that point only, I offer my thanks.

“Ah, alright. Then... sooner or later, we’ll do it.”

And the night advanced exceedingly lazily.

By the way, I definitely have to say this, but just because we were sleeping lined up next to each other, doesn’t mean we did what you were hoping we did. Sorry to burst your bubble.

3 Third Chapter



3.1 Third Chapter Part One

December 24th. The night when harmonious lovers would come together and whisper of love. Christmas Eve.

And that night... I... came with my little sister to a love hotel.⁴¹

“... Well, I’m going to go shower... you better not peek.”

“Who the hell would peek? Just go shower.”

“Hmph.”

She snorted, and disappeared into the shower room.

I also snorted, and sat down heavily onto the double bed.

“..... Haah.....”

Flustered, I sighed and looked around the room nervously.

It was a small room around with around 8 tatami of space. More than half the space was taken up by this big double bed.

The ceiling lights were turned on, but even then the room was quite dim.

“.....”

Click. Flipping the switch near my pillow, the lights right above the bed also turned on, and it became a bit brighter. But it still wasn’t completely bright.

⁴¹Hotels that are generally used by people who want a private place to have sex.

I heard the sound of the shower going in the other room. The smell of soap began to gently fill the air.

Kirino probably had not noticed yet... but I could see her silhouette from this side of the frosted glass. This lighting and the frosted glass... it was all probably meant to build up a lustful atmosphere.

“.....”

Whoosh. The minute I discovered the secret of the frosted glass, I quickly averted my gaze.

Completely against my will, my feet started tapping on the floor nervously.

“..... What exactly am I getting nervous about?”

This is bad, isn't it? This is really bad. Hey, hey, calm down, Kyouzuke, it's just your sister.

“I know that..... I know that but.....”

My feet began to tap even more heavily. I could feel my face heating up.

Not being able to tolerate my restlessness any more, I looked for something that would distract my attention.

I found a remote control near my pillow. Pushing the power button, I saw the LCD television in the corner of the room turn on.

However...

“C-Crap...!”

I quickly turned the television off. Why the hell was there an ero video on?!

I hurriedly glanced at the shower room, but luckily it seemed Kirino had not heard anything.

Phew... I rubbed my chest in relief. If I had really watched an adult video while my little sister was taking a shower, I have no idea what she would say to me. That was close...

Although... yeah, I suppose this was a hotel in which people did that kind of thing.

So, why exactly was I here with my little sister...?

“Arghhhhhh~~~ what should I doooo...?”

Frustrated, I scratched at my chest. I could feel my heartbeat throbbing.

To think I would get involved in a mess like this and come to a place like this with my little sister...

Steam slowly leaked out into the bedroom from the ever-continuing shower. Accompanied by the sweet fragrance of the soap...

“..... How did it all come to this...?”

Well, to explain that, we're going to have to start from the very beginning.

3.2 Third Chapter Part Two

December had just started.

As was becoming standard, I was being forced to play against my sister in a computer game in her room.

It was the 3D fighter “Little Sister Wars - Siscalypse.” By the way, Kirino and I were both playing on separate computers. Kirino was using a desktop, and I was using a laptop, and we were playing online. So there was really no reason we had to be in the same room playing, but...

“You’re forbidden to take this laptop out of this room. You’ll just end up looking up ero sites.”

Well, there wasn’t much I could do if she said that. Although, it would have been nice if she would just forget about that...well, putting that aside... in the middle of our match, she suddenly said this:

“... Hey... there’s... something else...”

While she said that, she fell from the sky and threw a continuous stream of attacks at me. The character Kirino was controlling (the mahou shoujo character) let loose a number of rings made of light, which bound my character and left me temporarily unable to move.

“Huh? What... hey, don’t launch a surprise attack at me while you’re talking to me!!”

“Huh? But it’s your fault for being careless, isn’t it? Ahh, you’re dead. So weak.”

Turning my character into cinders with her character’s overly flashy special move, Kirino grinned happily.

“Hey, stop only using overpowered hidden characters!”

“I’m just using the characters I know how to use. Is that so wrong?”

Uwaah, so these types of people exist... people who would just make selfish excuses and end up annoying everyone at the arcade.

After thoroughly bashing my abilities at playing the game, Kirino seemed to have remembered something.

“Ahh... I mentioned that there was something...”

“So, what is it?”

Come on, just spit it out.

“... I need some life advice.”

“....”

H-Here we go again..... my insides froze, and who could blame me?

A lot of pain and strife had been caused in my life by the turmoil that has sprung up from those exact words...

“... Do you want to know what I need advice about?”

If I look like I do, then you need to go see an eye specialist. Is that really what the person asking for advice should be saying?

Also, what the hell was up with that smug chuckle? That’s just disgusting.

I was incredibly reluctant to do this, but...

If I didn't tell her what she wanted to hear, she would definitely get angry...

"... Alright, go ahead then."

"What's with that casual attitude? If you want me to tell you, be more courteous about it."

"What's with *your* casual attitude?! If you want my advice, why don't you be more courteous?! Cut it out!"

Tch... I clicked my tongue loudly.

"Also, what exactly did you want me to do to 'be more courteous'?"

"Kneel."

Why does the one *giving* the advice have to kneel?!"

I seriously have no idea what's going on! Is receiving the topic for advice like getting a divine decree or something?!"

"Come on, kneel."

"As if I would!"

I was completely annoyed and we fell into silence for a little while, but it seemed that Kirino really wanted to tell me what this advice session would be about, so she didn't wait for me to kneel.

"I guess there's no helping it then... this time only I'll give you special permission and you

don't have to kneel. Be grateful and listen."

What a pompous attitude... As I looked at her with a sour expression, I began to listen to what my little sister needed "life advice" on.

All the while thinking that there was no way anything good could come out of this...

3.3 Third Chapter Part Three

"What? What did you just say?"

"As I said... the cell phone novel I wrote is going to be made into a novel!"

.....

Well? If your little sister suddenly started spouting this nonsense one day, what would you do?

Scowling, I stared at Kirino as she fought hard (and failed) to keep down a broad grin.

"Ah, by the look you're giving me... you don't believe me, do you?"

"Meh."

What kind of sequence of terrible mistakes would a publishing company have to go through to actually put your rape novel into the general circulation? And from what Kuroneko had told me, the grammar and syntax were essentially nonexistent...

And although I don't know much about this area, it doesn't seem to be an easy thing to get a book published.

“Ahh, what can I say? When you’re as talented as I am, things like this sometimes happen, right~?”

Yeah yeah. Blah blah.

No matter how I thought about it, it all seemed like nonsense... but I still felt a tinge of unease from the fact that my sister wasn’t the type to make these statements without any basis for them at all.

And in spite of the fact that I didn’t seem to believe her, Kirino did not get discouraged at all.

She condescendingly crossed her arms, and looked at me as if I were some kind of dunce.

“Don’t you want to know... how all this happened?”

It’s not like I want you to tell me, but if I tell you that you’d just get angry, right?

“Sure... tell me.”

“Hmmmm~~? Well, I guess if you really want me to~~”

Kirino took out her cell phone, and began to type rapidly. Afterwards, with a triumphant expression, she handed me the phone.

“Here, take a look at this site.”

“O-Ohh?”

It seemed that the cell phone site was titled “Cell Phone i-Club.” That title was displayed in huge letters in the site’s most prominent spot. On the whole, the site was colorful and fancily designed. Under the title, a number of menus were lined up...

Dammit. This is just like the time I first looked at that Siscali walkthrough wiki. When the site was complicated and there were so many choices like this, I had no idea what to do. This was completely different from using my cell phone to look up the weather forecast.

“Hmph, well? Do you see?”

“Not at all. Where should I be looking?”

“Huuh?? Tch, give it to me!”

Kirino was peeking at the cell phone screen from next to me, and then pushed her body to mine while fiddling with the cell phone.

“... H-Hey, don’t stick so close.”

Our arms were entangled. And what’s more, she gave off a sugary smell and it made me feel uneasy...

This isn’t sicon or anything. This has nothing to do with us being related.

... Hm? I just realized that up until a few months ago, I had never had this thought before.

Kirino prodded my stomach with her elbow. Because of that, the questions that were surfacing were once again pushed deep down into my psyche.

“Here! You push this library link here...!”

“T-This publication information thing here?”

“No. Under that. Where it talks about monthly rankings.”

“... Here?”

Placing the cursor on the place Kirino had indicated, I finally understood where Kirino wanted me to look.

And also, how the hell do you expect me to know where to look just by handing me the cell phone? Are you an idiot?

“This is the site’s monthly rankings for the cell phone novels people submit.”

“...? Submit?”

I cocked my head in puzzlement, and Kirino’s lips warped in annoyance.

“Haah... you... you have no idea what this site is for, do you...?”

Well, sure... but why does that have to throw you into shock like this?

Ugh, you’re so annoying!

“... I guess I have to explain that then... ugh, what a bother.”

Kirino wearily brushed her hair back. Her actions were all so deliberately seductive.

Tch... it’s not like I want to hear about this!

But I’ll listen anyways. There was definitely something annoying about stopping midway through something.

So then...

According to Kirino's explanation, this "Cell Phone i-Club" was a site that allowed you to make your own website easily from your cell phone. And then on that homepage, you could keep a public journal, or you could put a message board on there and socialize with other people online.

"... This is a bit like that SNS⁴² service you signed up for before, right?"

"I guess you could say that. They are definitely similar. And also, there are a lot of terms thrown around like 'blog sites' and 'SNS,' but the actual differences between these things is vague at best."

"Hmm."

As always, I gave a noncommittal response when faced with things I didn't understand.

"In the beginning, there was a lot of originality in the features people were coming up with, but lately even blog sites have SNS functionality. And there are popular sites like WebClap⁴³ and Twitter, but there have also been a lot of rip-offs of those services, and everything gets jumbled up and honestly it all seems the same to me. But really, I think everyone should just use the well-known ones... or something like that. Aaaanyways..."

Kirino put an end to her speech.

"This 'Cell Phone i-Club' site has a function where you can write and submit cell phone novels."

This "NOVEL function" appeared to be the main function of this site. Putting your own cell phone novels on your home page, and then submitting it to the site and getting it voted on in a popularity poll...

The "monthly ranking" that Kirino had mentioned was probably exactly that.

⁴²Social Networking Service. This term already came up in the first volume.

⁴³You know how you can like websites on Facebook? That's what WebClap basically is.

“And also. The Cell Phone i-Club makes the really popular cell phone novels into books.”

“Ahh...”

I didn’t know that before. Certainly, I’ve seen this kind of thing mentioned on the news, but I guess that kind of thing really happened.

I guess cell phone novels were not really things written by professional authors.

Well, granted, the minute the cell phone novels were published, the author would be earning money from it, so then he or she could be considered a professional. I’m a bit fuzzy on the technical definitions here.

To put it a bit cynically, this “Cell Phone i-Club” company dangled the bait of getting published in front of its members. That’s a pretty good way of doing things...

Hm... I’ve finally started putting all the pieces together... B-But... W-Wait...

“S-So you mean, the cell phone novel you wrote...”

“Yes! It was first on the rankings last month!”

“Seriously?! That rape novel?!”

“Seriously seriously! Eheh, isn’t that amazing?”

Kyaaahh~~~ Kirino gave out a high-pitched squeal. Putting both hands on her cheeks, she grinned bashfully.

She was acting similarly to when she was putting on her nice act, but this time she actually seemed genuine.

To think she would be able to be so unguarded and happy in front of me... it actually made me quite happy.

She also didn't seem to mind that I had, without thinking, called her book a "rape novel."

But... I guess there really were people who liked her novel.

That's surprising... If Kuroneko caught wind of this, she'd probably die from the shock. I mean, to think a novel she had heaped so many insults on would turn out to be really popular and actually get published... she would have no option but to rethink her outlook on writing.

Although, it is true that I still haven't read this cell phone novel Kirino had written.

And I really didn't feel like reading a story my sister had thought up. All the more after I heard that awful summary of it. Although...

"Isn't it highly unusual to get the first thing you ever write published...?"

"Eh? Ehh? This is pretty unfamiliar territory for me, so I don't really know. That might be true, I guess? Well, it's because my talents just towered so high above everyone else! Sort of makes you feel sorry for all those big-headed wannabe idiots who have been submitting things for a long time, doesn't it~~?"

Annoying. Today's Kirino was more annoying than usual.

Later, I found out that a "wannabe" referred to people who wanted to be content creators (in this case, novel authors), and was primarily a term used to ridicule people who couldn't make it in the field. Even to someone like me who had no desire to be an author, Kirino's words came off as irritating, so I could imagine that "wannabes" might want to kill her if they heard her say that. Like Kuroneko had wanted to.

By the way, the word "wannabe" apparently came from English, and seemed to imply that

someone who “wanted to be” something also “applied to be” that something.⁴⁴

“Hmm... well, for that to become a book, there must have been some pretty generous people over there.”

“Hm? Ah, no no. Even though I said it was going to get published, it’s a bit different...”

“Hm?”

“It’s not like just because I got first in the rankings, they’re going to publish my novel.”

“What do you mean?”

“Go and bring me some snacks and juice first.”

“What the hell does that have to do with anything?!”

Don’t just order me around and break the flow of conversation like that!

... But why was it that I walked to the refrigerator without a single complaint?

3.4 Third Chapter Part Four

In her usual home base of the living room, my little sister drank the cola I had prepared for her and began to talk.

“I already said this before, but if I want to get my novel published...”

⁴⁴Yes, the word “wannabe” here is literally “wanabi.” It is taken directly from the English.

According to Kirino, while it may be true that she placed first in the monthly rankings, it wasn't the case that she would be able to get published immediately.

Just because she had placed first in the rankings was not enough to prove that her work had enough appeal to be published.

The criteria for getting published was not the monthly rankings, but rather...

"In general, the standard for getting published is having over a million page views."

"Page views?"

"It's the number of people who have read the novel."

"A-Ahh... so, it can't get published if less than a million people read it?!"

"You don't have to go that far. Even if the same person reads a page twice, the page view number increases. It's basically like an internet access counter. It's a counter of the total number of page views across *all the pages* in the novel."

In other words, if someone read a 100-page novel to the very end, that would count as a hundred views.

So, one million wasn't the number of people who had to read her novel, but how many times her novel was read.

"But even then, a million is an absurd number. After all, if for instance your novel is 100 pages, it's not necessarily the case that someone would read it from cover to cover. If it's boring, for example, they would stop reading in the middle."

"Well, that's true. But the really popular cell phone novels get over a million views within three months. And then, only once they get past that number do they get contacted by the Cell Phone i-Club. Of course, even if you do get over a million views, that doesn't guarantee your novel is going to get published."

Hm. To put it simply, if the managing company for the site didn't think a novel would sell, no matter how many views it got it wouldn't be made into a book. They were a business after all, so this was probably a pretty obvious statement...

"That's a pretty tough process..."

I had misunderstood the situation a bit because my sister came to me so suddenly with all this talk about getting her cell phone novel published.

It really wasn't the case that anybody could get a cell phone novel published.

And well, that statement is probably rather offensive to people who have published books.

"... It's quite a dangerous journey, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"By the way, around how many views does your cell phone novel have?"

"Around three hundred fifty thousand. It's been a month since I submitted it."

"Ahh."

That's pretty amazing. At that rate, she really might be able to get a million views within three months...

"But, you're still quite a bit off of a million views."

"Yeah. I was pretty surprised when I heard about all this... hehe."

Kirino grinned. She took a big bite out of one of the cookies I had prepared.

“Yesterday, I got an email from one of the editors. They said they had read my novel.”

“Really...? But Kirino... doesn’t this seem like it’s going just a bit *too* well?”

Also, what exactly is an editor in the first place? All I knew is that they worked at the companies that published books.

“Maybe.”

I thought she would get angry at me for raining on her parade, but Kirino seemed to be viewing the situation rather calmly.

“The editor requested a personal meeting with me to talk more about the details...”

“Is it a man? A woman?”

“I think it’s a man?”

“For example, what if he’s lying about being an editor? If it ends up being some strange person, it could be dangerous, you know?”

I apologize to the editors of the world, but just judging from the name, that occupation just felt suspicious to me.⁴⁵

Also, it’s pretty well known that cell phone novels are often written by female junior high students, so... it could be possible that the person was really a seducer who was pretending to be an editor and was dangling the promise of getting the girl published as compelling bait. My facial expression sobered and I crossed my arms, at which point Kirino peered at me.

⁴⁵Contrary to Kyousuke’s implication here, my editors are not all sexual deviants... probably ;).

“... Heh, what? Are you worried about me?”

“D-Don’t be stupid. Who would worry about *you*...?”

When I turned the other way, Kirino seemed to be strangely enjoying herself and burst into laughter.

“Kyahaha... well, after all, you’re a siscon, right? Ahh, gross gross.”

“I told you I wasn’t worrying! Cut it out!”

Dammit, for how much longer did she intend to torment me with that line...?

“... Ugh.”

Kirino sneered at me sadistically.

“Sure sure, I’ll do you a favor and cooperate then. Well, what do you want to do? If you want to come, I’ll let you tag along with me.”

“.....”

I see. The life advice was about this... In other words, she was afraid of meeting with this alleged editor by herself, so she wanted me to go with her.

Hah... if she just asked me that straight on, because I’m not a monster, I would be able to honestly accept her request and go along with her. But her attitude was just horrible. If I said I would go at this point, I would look like I was going out of my own free will out of worry for her, wouldn’t I?!

Who the hell would agree to go from this position?! Am I an idiot?! There’s got to be a better way for her to ask!

Mounting a counteroffensive, I asked a question in a disgruntled tone.

“... Hm. Well, if I don’t go with you, what are you going to do?”

“I’m going alone.”

“Idiot, at least go with mom or something!”

“I don’t want to. Mom is a gossip, so she’ll definitely tell dad. She was the one who ended up telling him that I was secretly doing modeling work.”

I see... that old woman was a gossip. I mean, you’ve gotten off easy so far. For me, the particulars of the first ero book I bought were leaked out to the neighborhood, you know? Can you understand how I felt when I was walking home from school and saw my mother talking with one of the neighbors, clutching my June copy of Cream magazine?⁴⁶

Well, whatever. I can deal with the trauma.

“So, are you telling me that you don’t want mom and dad to find out about you writing cell phone novels?”

“I mean... dad would probably be against it...”

Well, that’s certainly true.

“But you do realize that if you put a book out, there’s going to be money involved and it’ll be impossible then to keep this hidden from our parents.”

“I know... but I’ll cross that bridge should we come to it. I want to keep this a secret for as long as possible.”

⁴⁶Tis an ero book. Pretty self explanatory honestly.

It seemed that should the book actually make it into publication, Kirino was planning on getting the publisher to help her explain the situation to our parents. First deal with the more pressing obstacles, wait for help, and then finally persuade the parents... it indeed sounded like it could work. It seemed that she was pretty familiar with how to deal with a situation like this, which might have come from her past experience with getting our parents to approve of her modeling job.

“So, I can’t tell mom. And if you don’t come with me, I’m going alone.”

“... I see.”

Do what you want... is what I wanted to say, but I suddenly imagined what it would be like to let my sister go alone.

After all, she was pretty cute looking... if she went to a crowded place like Tokyo then she really might get hit on. And if that editor or whatever was a bad person, no matter how much she tries, there’s only so much a single junior high school student can do to resist.

It’s not like I’m worried about her, but when she tells me about this directly it does bother me...

Tch... I guess I have no choice.

“... Alright. I’ll go with you.”

“Huh? What’s with that reluctant expression? If you don’t ask me properly I won’t take you with me.”

“Please take me with you!”

I had gotten desperate! Ugh... now if someone accused me of being a siscon, I don’t know if I can argue against it!

Even though it really isn't anything like that.

3.5 Third Chapter Part Five

And before long, it was Sunday.

We had come to a publishing company in Shinjuku⁴⁷. Leaving from the Western entrance, we walked in the direction of the Tokyo Government Office, and walked halfway around Shinjuku Central Park in the clockwise direction. The building we arrived at was a black, tall building. It seemed that the publishing company in question was housed in this building.

... But really, Shinjuku is just filled to the brim with tall buildings, isn't it? The district was so crowded with people, and the station was so difficult to navigate through. It was almost like an underground labyrinth.

I checked the time on my cell phone, and sighed.

"That was close, but we seem to have made it on time."

"Hmph, there wouldn't have been a problem if we didn't get lost. I don't even have enough time to fix my makeup. What the hell?"

Today, Kirino was dressed up even more maturely than usual. I mean... usually she also dressed in quite a mature fashion, but this time it felt different...

She was wearing a pair of light-yellow-brown pant suits, along with some light, tasteful makeup, and indeed looked like a trendy, professional woman.

"... This is the first time we came here, so there's no way we would not get lost at all, you know?"

⁴⁷Big business district of Tokyo.

Also, this map was terrible. Walk for eight minutes from the station... how damn fast did it expect us to walk?

Our getting lost in the station was a bit to blame as well, but it took us over fifteen minutes to walk here.

I grumbled internally about the map I had printed out from the publishing company's public website.

"So, you were supposed to wait for them in the lobby, was it?"

"Yeah... they told me to be in the lobby by four-thirty..... You, wait around here."

"... Hm? You sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"Idiot. I spent so much time dressing up formally today, and if I'm seen next to a geek like you it'll all come to nothing. You better not come with me."

... But, wasn't the entire point of this trip that she was afraid to meet with this guy alone, and so took me with her?

Perhaps she understood my doubts, but Kirino tightened her lips and fell into silence. We stood there for a while, and she finally spoke.

"You don't have to come with me... but stay somewhere close. And, if I send you a blank mail, come."

"Ah, roger."

Alright, let's do it as you say.

"Well, I'm off."

“Ah, good luck.”

Kirino lightly lifted an arm in farewell, and entered into the lobby. The automatic doors opened and then shut behind her.

Not wanting to stand in the way, I moved towards a nearby pillar, and waited next to the entrance of the building. I might be getting an SOS from Kirino, so I held my phone in my hands.

... Hmm. Was there really a point in me coming today...? Just as I was thinking that, Kirino came out of the building with a slender man in a suit.

Even though I had nothing to feel guilty about, I found myself quickly hiding in the shadow of the pillar.

I felt my cell phone vibrating.

“!”

I braced myself, thinking that the SOS had come, but it wasn't that.

“We’re changing the meeting place. Follow us.”

“..... Yeah yeah.”

Well, it seemed that she could multitask and mail me while she was doing other things. It definitely wasn't something I could do.

Hm. But, I guess they weren't going to talk in the editorial department?

Keeping a bit of distance between us, I tailed Kirino and company. They quickly crossed an intersection, walked South for a bit, and entered into a café.

“Hm... what should I do?”

Should I go in as well? As I stood there hesitating, my cell phone once again vibrated.

“...?! Ah... it’s just a message.”

Geez, because she had given me such a weird order when we parted, every time I got mail I was really surprised. I would start thinking that something dangerous had happened...

So... what was it this time? **“Wait there”**? Yeah yeah...

“Haaah...”

Looking up at the evening sun, I sighed. After that, I stood stock still near the café door for around an hour.

3.6 Third Chapter Part Six

The day ended, and just as it was getting dark, Kirino came out of the café by herself.

She was grinning and seemed very satisfied about something. It seemed that things had gone well.

I raised one hand in greeting.

“Hey, good work today.”

“... Huh? You’re still here?”

“Haha, you... saying something so outrageous so naturally...”

You’re still here?

You’re still here, she said?!

So cruel...! Is it alright for words as cruel as this to exist in this world?!

I wasted my holiday and came all the way to Shinjuku with you, and waited here for over an hour not knowing when I would be getting an SOS message from you! And how do you repay me?!

“Why are you crying? Were you that worried about me?”

“I wouldn’t worry about you if hell froze over! Who the hell would worry about you?!”

I threw my blunt statement at her and turned heel. I walked a bit away from Kirino, making it seem like I was leaving her there...

... Alright, was she a bit sorry now for her actions?

I turned around to see...

“Are you trying to go home alone in a taxi?!”

“Eh? They gave me cab fare to get home.”

Don’t respond so nonchalantly like that! That’s not it, why the hell are you so naturally trying to leave me here and going home by yourself... well whatever. It’s not like saying this to you would make a difference.

Speaking of which, there were a bunch of taxis passing by this area, weren't there? There were probably a lot of people who used them around here... but because of that, I was almost in the horrific situation of turning around and finding that my sister had vanished.

Despite our argument, Kirino and I ended up riding the taxi back to the station.

On the way, we sat in the backseat and talked.

"So? How did it go?"

Was this editor a reliable person?

Kirino answered my question energetically.

"He said there were a lot of interesting points in the book! And, he said it really did feel modern girl-ish! And so he thought a lot of readers would be able to connect to it... he really praised it!"

"... I see."

That's not exactly what I was asking... but whatever. From her response, I could at least tell that he wasn't a dangerous person. Nonetheless, I had to make sure.

"What kind of person was he?"

"Hmmm..."

Kirino thought with a finger on her lower lip.

"He was definitely a serious person. How do I put it... an elite businessman? Something like that. He also had great manners. Yeah, I also asked him a lot of questions about his editorial department, and he answered them all without hesitation... and, best of all, he gave me lots of commentary about my novel. He wasn't as bad as you were worried he would be."

“.....”

It's not like I was worried. Hm, so it seemed he was legitimate. I'm glad.

Well, certainly, he seemed like a punctual person. I didn't really see much of him except from the back, but with his classy suit, he really did seem like an able company employee.

“Hehe... he was also pretty handsome.”

What does that have to do with anything? This is why women are so... don't judge a person just from his looks, dammit.

When I fell into silence, Kirino said something like “Why are you getting angry?”

“See, he also gave me this.”

She held out the editor's business card. I took it, and took a good look at it.

MediAscii Works Second Editorial Department Mobile Division, Kumagai Ryunosuke.

Under his name was written his company's phone number, and under there, in pen, was written what was probably his personal cell phone number and mailing address. This information was annotated with the comment “Use these please,” so he probably wanted her to use the personal information should she want to contact him.

“So, Kumagai-san, huh?”

“I've gotten business cards from publishers while modeling before, and they do look like this.”

“It’s not like I was saying it was a fake card or anything... Well? Are you getting your novel published?”

I could no longer tolerate my little sister’s arrogant tone, so I changed the subject.

Kirino didn’t seem to mind at all.

“Well, that’s the other thing. They want me to write a new book. He talked about a lot of things with me, but he advised me that as it is now, the novel didn’t have enough of an emphasis on the target audience. So, I should write it with more focus on the people reading it. A story that’s conscious of the audience would be more popular, right? And if I can write something good, they’ll publish it.”

“..... So, are you intending to take them up on that offer?”

At this point, a bunch of concerns were going through my head.

“Yeah. I’ve already made it this far, so I’m going to try.”

I got the feeling that any objection I raised would be meaningless at this stage... but let me just bring up a single point.

“You’ve already decided, so it’s not like I can interfere much with your decision... but there’s one thing that might water down your motivation... do you seriously have enough free time to be doing this?”

My little sister was a track and field ace, an active teen magazine model, an honors student who had some of the top scores in the prefecture, and after her Comiket debut recently, was also an otaku.

So, how exactly was she planning to free up enough time to do this as well?

Recently, just as always, I heard mother boasting about you, but I also heard her say a few other things of interest.

... Both your club activities and work were going swimmingly, so things pile up and you're especially busy near the end of the year, aren't you?

Didn't you also say that the game you made a reservation for in Akihabara was coming out near the end of the year? And because it's you, you would definitely make sure you cleared that game, right? ... Geez, this idiot, at the present moment I already didn't know how she found time for everything she was doing... and then she's planning on adding writing a cell phone novel on top of all that... what exactly is she trying to do?

"Eh, I'll manage... it'll definitely get busy though..."

Kirino probably had similar concerns about finding enough time. She crossed her arm and lifted her lower lip, seeming to sink into thought. She raised a hand and began to mumbling things like "there's that, and this, and that..." while counting on her fingers. But that stopped before long, and she made a firm declaration.

"Well, I'll figure it out. After all, who do you think I am?"

"I suppose... well, just do what you want."

I responded nonchalantly. I felt a tinge of pride from somewhere, but it must have been my imagination.

"Even if you didn't say it, I would do what I wanted. Oh right. Before long, I'm planning to take a trip to Shibuya to collect data. You, come with me. After all, you were completely useless today."

Yeah yeah. I've already lost the will to get angry. It's not like saying anything to you would make a difference.

Once she decided on something, nothing I said after that point would register.

Just do whatever the hell you want with me.

3.7 Third Chapter Part Seven

And time passed... and before long it was December 24th.

Just like always, I was walking to school with Manami.

“Hey, hey, Kyou-chan... are you free today?”

“Hm?”

Glancing next to me, I saw Manami giving me a fluffy smile.

“My family is celebrating Christmas tonight at home. We made red rice⁴⁸ ... and cakes... so if you want... this year as well...”

“Pass. I have prior plans this year.”

“Gaaaah?”

Manami’s mouth formed a perfect square and she stood in shock.

She let her schoolbag fall to the floor with a thud, and her chin trembled.

“P-P-Prior plans? Like what?”

“What’s wrong? Why are you giving me that look?”

⁴⁸Beans and mocha, usually used in a celebratory fashion.

“I-I’m not giving you a look. I’m not!”

You definitely are. You’re even more flustered than usual.

“..... H-Hey..... These prior plans..... Who are they with?”

Manami asked me with a fragile voice, and I fell into a gloomy silence.

Should I tell her or shouldn’t I? After a few moments of hesitation, in the end I quickly turned the other way and spat my words out.

“It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Fueeeh.... Oo.....”

Don’t look so down about it, geez...

I couldn’t say it, but on Christmas Eve...

3.8 Third Chapter Part Eight

“Why do I have to come with my sister to Shibuya...?”

“Did you say something?”

“No, nothing.”

I responded curtly to my sister’s menacing question.

Indeed, my prior arrangements were coming to Shibuya with Kirino to collect data for her cell phone novel.

Leaving the station, we walked towards the scramble crossing that faced the 109 building. Annoying preaching about God and this and that blared from speakerphones attached to a van.

The sky was tinged with the color of sunset. Night would probably fall soon. When that happened, the various lights set up around the city would turn on, and the place would probably look prettier.

Today, Kirino was also decked completely out in model fashion, and because she was in her natural element here, she completely fell in step with her surroundings. This was a place filled with people like Kirino.

The crowd in front of the station reminded me of Akihabara and Comiket, but the people walking around felt completely different in terms of how they looked and dressed. Everyone seemed excessively stylish, and the probability of passing by a good-looking guy or girl was remarkably high.

It was to the point where my sister didn't really stand out from the crowd.

Ugh... as it was, I felt pretty underdressed in this place...

"Tch, you're wondering why we had to come on Christmas Eve of all days, right? I also obviously don't want to spend this day here. But there are going to be a lot of Christmas Eve scenes in the cell phone novel I'm planning to write, and I'm also on a deadline, so we had to come today. I even had to turn down Ayase when she asked me to hang out with her. If it weren't for this, I would be going with Ayase to a Christmas party her office is holding."

Kirino went on and on and on and on...

I feel like I'm being patronized here. I also would have gone as usual to the Christmas party at the Tamura household if I didn't have these plans.

I had to break those plans and come with you, so you should be thankful too.

“Hey, are you listening to me? Did you really hear what I just said?”

“Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah... I heard eeeverything.”

“... Hah, don't act so conceited. It's gross.”

“I said I heard you! Are you listening to me?!”

Kirino and Ayase, Kuroneko and Saori... why do junior high school girls never listen? I appreciate a certain bespectacled, plain-looking girl now more than ever, dammit.

“... Well? What data exactly are you trying to collect?”

I know what data is, but I have no idea how she wants to go about collecting it.

If all we're going to do is stroll around like this, then there's no reason I should be here. Thinking these thoughts, I looked at my sister, and saw that she was staring at a notebook and mumbling.

“Kirino?”

“I heard you. I'm figuring it out now, so be quiet.... So, first off is...”

The notebook Kirino was staring at appeared to have an outline of the cell phone novel written on it (It seemed like the plot outline).

Kirino looked back and forth between the notebook and Shibuya, and pointed to the intersection in front of us. It was a famous intersection I had often seen in TV dramas. When the light turned green, a huge number of people crossed through the intersection.

“We’ll start there.”

“The Shibuya Scramble Intersection, huh...?”⁴⁹

I have no idea what kind of story she’s planning on writing, but this place definitely fit her character pretty well.

“And, what are we going to do at the Scramble?”

“We’re going to follow the events of the prologue in order. The protagonist, a junior high school girl, meets her boyfriend for a date on Christmas Eve.”

“Huh?”

“As I said, we’re going to follow the scene and simulate what the protagonist does in the story. If I personally experience it, I’ll be able to write it more realistically.”

“I see. So collecting data meant something like this. You’ll be fulfilling the role of the protagonist, and I’ll be her boyfriend.”

“Reluctantly, yes, that’s the case.”

Finally, I understood the reason she brought me here. I’ve never written a novel before, but they do say “seeing is believing”... So if it’s like that, I won’t refuse to help.

But seriously... when she set her mind on something, she gave it a hundred percent, didn’t she...?

To the point where she sacrificed her own Christmas... you’re really giving it your all, geez.

⁴⁹This is quite a famous crosswalk in Shibuya. When the crosswalk light turns green all traffic stops and a huge influx of people cross.

Take her track club for instance, or her studies, or her modeling work, or her eroge hobby...

And now, her cell phone novels.

“Okay okay. Soo, what should we do first? S-Should we hold hands and cross or something...?”

“Well, first you can go get run over by that dump truck.”

“You make minced meat out of the boyfriend from the very beginning?!”

What kind of gore-fest was this novel supposed to be?!

“Yuck. Stop with the grotesque expressions. It’s a pretty established strategy in a love story to shock the readers by starting off with a tragic event.”

“Speaking as if you’re a know-it-all... there’s no way I’m going to do that!”

“Huh? Hah... don’t be selfish. I said we’re going to do everything as it happens in the plot. If you don’t try to do everything exactly, I won’t be able to get any real information from it.”

“As I said, why the hell are you trying to get me to simulate the death of her boyfriend?! What kind of information exactly do you think you can glean from your aniki’s corpse?!”

Hearing my shouting, Kirino raised one hand as if she were a psychometer⁵⁰ helping the police.

“A clue to track down the killer?”

⁵⁰Essentially a psychic detective I think.

“You’re the killer!”

Also, do you seriously plan on killing off the boyfriend in the prologue? That seems like such a heavy story...

“Hey, for your information, cell phone novel readers want these kinds of plots.”

Seriously...? Exactly where is her confidence flowing out from?

To me, it seems more like the prologue to a horror novel...

“Well, whatever. It would be bothersome to quit data collecting after we’ve just begun. So I’ll just snap a few photos here and that’ll be it.”

While she said that, she took a few photos of the intersection.

Ohh, she seems to be doing things relatively professionally.

“Everything’s okay here. Let’s move on.”

3.9 Third Chapter Part Nine

Next, we arrived at the 109 building. I saw that they had constructed a concert stage in front of the entrance, which reminded me that tonight was Christmas Eve.

Let me just fill in those who are confused; 109 is a building in which there were many clothing shops popular with younger girls.⁵¹

⁵¹A famous building in Shibuya that specializes in modern female fashion. You cannot miss it if you go to Shibuya even if you tried.

Granted, Kirino had explained what this building was to me just now.

The total area of each floor was not that large, but the building extended from two floors underground to eight floors in the air, and was naturally packed with Shibuya-style girls. This was the first time I had ever entered this building, but the minute I entered I felt intensely out of place, and wondered if it was really alright for me to be here in the first place. It was probably my imagination that I felt disapproving stares all around me. I mean, in here, the probability of encountering a pretty person was even higher than it was outside. Just watching the slender girls who looked a step away from being professional models along with the gaudily dressed girls walking around in groups was quite a sight in its own right. Oh also, there was a strangely sweet smell in the room, and when I thought about it, it was the same scent I had smelled in my sister's room.

“For now, let's go up on those escalators over there and look at some clothes.”

“Yeah yeah.”

Steeling myself, I took a step forwards. Then, we began to look at clothes while going up and up and up on the escalators.

“But seriously, this place is filled to the brim with quite... interesting clothes. Like, who in the world would wear this incredibly revealing, pervy miniskirt on this mannequin here?”

This place seemed to regularly sell clothing that would embarrass you if you wore them and were not incredibly good-looking. Clothing that you would expect to see on Marilyn Monroe or worn on singing programs. I guess celebrity performers might also shop here.

“You don't have to give me your impressions on every little thing, you know. If you keep quiet, nobody is going to realize you're a country hick. Or, why don't you just go back to Chiba⁵² alone?”

“Hey, you live in the exact same place! Apologize right now to everyone who lives in Chiba!”

⁵²Hm, I don't think this has been mentioned yet, but Chiba is the city in which Kyouzuke and Kirino live.

Going up one more set of escalators, we came upon a floor that sold cute clothes. The clothes sold on this floor seemed a bit more aimed at children, so even if normal girls wore these it probably wouldn't look strange. The price tags also seemed reasonable, and didn't really go past 5000 yen. Hm...

"Why are you looking at that mannequin so closely? Could it be you want to buy something? Like that."

"Well... I was just thinking how nothing in this building would look good on Manami..."

"Hmph, that's not really true. The clothes on this floor especially aren't that showy."

Strangely, even though she almost always bashes Manami, Kirino spoke in her defense this time. It's probably because she had her own strong sense of principles when it came to fashion, and because of those principles she could naturally give a frank opinion on the matter. It's already probably a bit too late for me to say this, but in all honesty, I also thought that Manami might be able to wear the clothes on this floor...

But Kirino touched the waist of the mannequin I had been looking at, and a somewhat sinister smirk appeared on her face.

"But I mean... the clothes around here are all pretty tight around the waist. Are you sure she'd be alright?"

"Probably not."

Every year, from the beginning of fall to the end of winter, she... well, her waist gets a bit fat.

"Right? Kyahaha... if all you eat all day is sweets, you'll become a plain girl deluxe!"

"H-Hey, don't make fun of someone else's looks! How would you like it if I said you have a pretty round face for a model?!"

Smack! Her burst of laughter quickly turned into a demonic expression and she slapped me across the face.

“Ow?!?!”

A-Ahh... as I thought, you didn't like that...

3.10 Third Chapter Part Ten

Having explored the building up to the eighth floor, we turned around and this time headed underground.

We passed by floor B1 without stopping, and continued on to B2.

“So, are you getting data just by strolling around this building like this?”

“Sort of. But this is where the real work begins.”

Walking heavily, Kirino led me to the accessory shop SAMANTHA McBEE located on the floor B2. Earrings and ring accessories sparkled on their displays. When I picked a few up to check the price, I saw that many of them were reasonably priced at around 2000-3000 yen. Perhaps because this place was geared towards the youth, there was a surprising number of cheaper goods that they had put together.

“Well? What kind of scene are you gathering data for here?”

“The date scene between her and her boyfriend.”

Kirino absentmindedly and bluntly mumbled her response.

“Her boyfriend? Didn't you already make minced meat of him?”

“Well obviously, it’s a different boyfriend. This is a scene that happens a month after the original boyfriend dies.”

Hm..... hmmmm..... one month later, huh?

“What’s with that look? You want to say something?”

“Nah... I was just thinking how she got a new boyfriend pretty quickly even though her old one had died...”

And she’s a junior high school student? What a bitch.

“That’s normal, isn’t it? You got a problem?”

“Yeah. Won’t that just make the readers hate her? At the very least, I’m not a fan of this cold-hearted protagonist.”

“You don’t know anything, do you? That’s how boys think. For me, I don’t take it as cold-heartedness, but rather resilience in the face of misfortune.”

“I guess that’s a possibility.”

I didn’t pursue the issue any further. After all, I couldn’t even begin to understand how junior high school girls thought. It’s Kirino’s book, so she can do what she wants with it.

“So, for that reason, buy me an accessory.”

“Huh? W-What? ... What did you say?”

Doubting my ears, I asked Kirino to repeat herself, prompting her to click her tongue.

“This is the scene in which she gets an accessory from her boyfriend, so buy an accessory for me.”

“...!!”

Did you hear that?! What kind of trickery was this?! C-Could it be... she couldn't have just been using the data collecting as an excuse for getting money out of me, right?!

I took a quick peek at my sister's face, and saw her snort derisively.

“What? What is this? Could it be you can't even do that much? I can't believe it. This throws all our plans off track.”

Now she's just saying whatever the hell she wants...

To an outside observer, wouldn't I look just like a poor boy who couldn't even buy a present for his girlfriend on Christmas Eve?

Oogh... people are glaring at me... I feel like I'm lying on a bed of needles here...

“... Which one do you want me to buy...?”

I had no choice but to concede.

“The truth is, I already picked something out the last time I came here... I want a Christmas limited-edition silver ring and accessory set. Here, look, isn't this suuuuper cute~?”

Kirino seemed to have already picked something out, and wasted no time in pointing out a showcase to me.

Ugh... well, if that's all, I can probably manage... things are relatively cheap here...

“Oogh.... U-Umm... excuse me!”

I begrudgingly called the female shopkeeper over. But I promptly regretted my rash actions.

If you ask why, it's because the price tag was so small that I had misread the price by a digit.

T-Thirty thousand yen?! It wasn't three thousand?!

U-Ugh... with an exceedingly cool expression, I wiped the cold sweat off my forehead.

“Oniichan doesn't have more than 18000 yen right now. Kirino, can you lend me some money?”

When I turned around, my sister had disappeared.

Tch, that asshole! She probably scented danger in the middle of my sentence and ran away!

“Sorry to keep you waiting~. I would highly recommend this as a present for your girlfriend over there~.”

“Ahaha, sorry, it turns out I didn't need anything! Hahaha!”

Giving the approaching shopkeeper a shameful smile, I hurriedly left that place behind.

3.11 Third Chapter Part Eleven

“Ugh, I can’t believe you! Why didn’t you have enough money?! Isn’t that impossible?!”

“Shut up! Isn’t it your fault in the first place for trying to get me to buy you something idiotically expensive?!”

Kirino and I argued as we left the 109 building.

It was probably my imagination that I could hear an occasional chuckle from the people we passed by. At least, that’s what I wanted to believe.

“Hah..... Geez.... How could you do that? I’m so embarrassed! I can’t ever go back to that shop now! And I couldn’t get any data for the scene where the boyfriend gifts the protagonist an accessory...”

Kirino’s lips thinned and she pouted. Her expression was certainly cute, but I’m not buying it. She’s definitely cursing me off on the inside.

“Just calm down and think. In the first place, I’m a normal high school student, so there’s no reason I would be walking around with that kind of money. Isn’t the protagonist’s boyfriend the same way?”

“No. He’s already employed at a company, so he has plenty of money. Hmph, if I made him a poor dweeb like you are, at that point all my readers would stop reading.”

You’re going to really say that to your real brother?⁵³ I gave a sarcastic response.

“Uh huh. I see. Well I’m just super sorry... hey, wait just a second.”

“What?”

⁵³Honestly, it baffles me that Kyousuke is still surprised by these things at this point.

“He’s employed at a company and he’s going out with a junior high schooler?!”

“Yeah, so? He’s the young president of a start-up company.”

He’s definitely a lolicon! He’s definitely a good-for-nothing!

I wanted to shout that out loud, but finding fault with her directly would probably piss her off, so I tried to raise my objections in a more roundabout way.

“Isn’t it... a bit risky to have the main character dating a company man?”

“You idiot, this kind of setup is normal. It’s a setup that’s relatively common, in fact.”

Seriously? It was like that? Ugh... sorry, but I can’t even begin to comprehend what counts as “normal” to you. Although, I’ve heard that lately, shoujo manga has been getting pretty extreme...

Perhaps she could deduce my fears from my facial expression, but Kirino began to explain her rationale.

“I’ll teach the idiot then. Girls like me are particularly weak to setups where the girl is dating an older man. So all the boys at the same school seem like kids to us. We would rather go out with a monkey at the zoo than with one of them.”

“.....”

Could it be that the girls in my class also think about me like that...?

Seriously...? I feel like I just heard something terrible...

“In my case, I won’t date anybody who’s not at least in their second year of high school. Anything less than that is impossible.”

“... Uh huh.”

I sighed gloomily.

I sympathized with the boys in her class that had probably developed a crush on her.

But certainly, for boys her age, having her as a girlfriend would be a lot of work.

Nah, even for boys older than her, the situation wouldn't be much different.

If there was a person who would go out with her, he would have to have the patience of a Buddhist monk or be a complete masochist.

“But seriously, what should I do... because of you, now I can't write the scene where the protagonist gets a gift from her boyfriend at Marukyuu...⁵⁴”

Kirino mumbled complaints while writing with her ballpoint pen in her notebook. She was probably changing the plot.

“Ah, alright. Let's make the scene like what happened... the boyfriend didn't have money and couldn't buy her the present.”

“Didn't have money... you mean he dropped his wallet or something?”

“No, I'm not writing anything that clichéd. The scene now is a date scene with a different, poor boyfriend.”

“Poor... different boyfriend...? Where did the lolicon company man run off to?”

⁵⁴A popular nickname for the 109 building. 1 is ichi, 0 is maru, 9 is kyuu in Japanese, so the 109 building is often called Ichimarukyuu, which then is often shortened to Marukyuu.

Crap, I was so surprised I accidentally blurted out the nickname I had for that character I had made in my head. Oops.

Kirino explained the fate of the lolicon company man.

“His affair with a junior high school student was leaked to his wife and company and he fell into ruin.”

“He was having an affair?!”

This lolicon was the worst! Would anybody even care if he was killed?!

“And after everything descends into chaos, in the end he returns to the wife he loves. Having been cruelly tossed to the side, the protagonist is severely hurt... and loses her faith in men... isn't that so sad?”

Not at all? It's the protagonist's own damn fault. In fact, the one who drew the shortest stick in all of this was probably the wife. The wife was just too kind. She really shouldn't forgive him. Mino Monta⁵⁵ would definitely say that as well.

If her husband was fooling around with a junior high schooler, the normal thing to do would be to divorce him and take his money in the settlement.

My heart was completely frozen, but Kirino didn't seem to notice and continued her explanation.

“And then? What happened to this terribly hurt protagonist? She self-destructs and joins a prostitution group. Compensated dating.”

“What a damn bitch...”

⁵⁵Japanese television commentator.

I couldn't keep it in anymore and voiced my real opinion. And who can blame me in this situation?

"What the hell did you just say?!"

"Nothing!"

Faced with my sister's glare and bared fangs, I put on an innocent smile. Ooo, scary scary.

Kirino seemed satisfied with that, and made this announcement while staring at me.

"And then, from the next scene on she gets a new boyfriend."

"She just keeps getting new ones huh... b-by the way, does this new boyfriend die or fall into ruin as well?"

"Nooo. She stays with him to the end. After all, the theme this time is pure love."

".... P-Pure love?"

What is she saying? I cocked my head to the side, confused.

"Yes, pure love!"

Kirino puffed out her chest, full of confidence. She had absolutely no doubts with regards to the words she just spurted out.

If I examined the situation closely, it seems that to her, the character who goes through so many boyfriends, is involved in an adultery scandal, goes into prostitution, and then remains faithful to the last boyfriend counts as "pure love." Perhaps this was just mainstream for cell phone novels, or was just a standard way of thinking for junior high school girls... but I didn't want to think that. W-What do you think?

Wasn't she mixing up "pure love" with "dirty love"?

3.12 Third Chapter Part Twelve

Having finished our data gathering in the 109 building, we entered Shibuya's center street.

As we came near to the Sakuraya, Kirino spoke.

"I'm a regular at that shop over there. The things they sell are cheap and relatively fashionable, so it's a good shop to use when a high school boy wants to give his junior high school girlfriend a gift."

"You... you're hell bent on getting me to buy you something, aren't you...?"

"Isn't that obvious? This time, the poor boyfriend doesn't have much money, but for all that he's incredibly perceptive and has good sense. So he says 'sorry I can't buy you something expensive' and brings the protagonist to his regular shop. Hehe, don't you think that's pretty cool?"

Kirino proudly talked about the boyfriend that she herself had made up.

Even while I was getting irritated internally, I told my sister what she wanted to hear. I used as nice of a voice as possible.

"Sorry I can't buy you something expensive."

"Shut up!"

"What the hell?! That attitude is way too unreasonable!"

Even though I had tried so hard to be patient with you and had even said something so embarrassing!

Kirino heard my shout, and her face warped into an incredibly sour expression.

“... When you say it, it sounds gross for some reason... I wonder why...?”

Don't make such a strange face! How many times do you have to beat me down before you're satisfied?!

But in the end, even though she complained all the way, she still made me buy her a 10,000 yen pair of earrings!

When we exited the shop, it had already gotten dark. As expected from the middle of winter, the nights were incredibly cold.

The breath of the people we passed by solidified into white mist even above their face masks.

We walked straight through the center street.

Turning left at the appropriate corner, we exited onto the main street. Facing directly right, we walked for a while, until we could finally see the Don Quixote⁵⁶ and the Tokyu⁵⁷. Kirino pointed straight ahead.

“The next scene happens there. This scene happens well into the second half of the book... but we're already here, so let's just gather data on it now.”

“Alright. So, what do we do next?”

⁵⁶Shop for various miscellaneous goods. Windmill sold separately.

⁵⁷Department store. There are a few Tokyu stores in Shibuya so I'm not sure which one it specifically is. And I'm in a lazy mood to further investigate.

“First, I’m going to face the Tokyu and start running, alright?”

“Alright.”

“Next, because it’s a red light, naturally there’s going to be a car headed for me while I cross the street, right?”

“A-Alright...”

“So then, you run over and protect me and get hit in my place.”

“Your boyfriends really have a tendency to get hit by cars!”

“You don’t really have to get hit by a car. After you push me out of the way, it’s also fine if you make a magnificent leap and dodge the car.”

“Like hell I’m going to do those acrobatics!”

“By the way, after that he gets amnesia.”

“Geez, these clichés are just piling up to the sky in this cell phone novel, aren’t they?!”

Actually, if she piles on the clichés that thoroughly, her novel might actually seem original!

As I recovered from my shortness of breath, brought on by retorting to her in rapid succession, Kirino shrugged her shoulders and sighed.

“Haah.... You’ve been acting so selfishly for a while... do you actually want to help me or not?”

“I want to help you but I don’t want to die! ... But hey, what kind of story is this in the first place? Is this type of scene really necessary? Let me see that notebook for a second.”

“... Fine, I don’t mind.”

As if showing me the story she wrote as a bit embarrassing, Kirino faintly blushed.

I took the notebook and gazed at the plot that was written across several pages.

“Hmm... what’s this?”

Characters

Protagonist. Name is Rino. Junior high school, first year. Reasonably cute.
← **Around half as cute as I am.**

Around half as cute as I am?! What a self-aggrandizing memo... she used her own cuteness as a standard with which she made the characters...? A-And what’s more...

“Rino... don’t tell me you parodied your own name to make the name of the main character.”

“Is that wrong? To some extent, if I can empathize with the main character it’s easier to write, so that’s what I did?”

“It’s not wrong, but earlier you read Kuroneko’s doujinshi and said it was gross that she projected herself onto the main character, didn’t you? So now look who’s talking?”

“Well, I’m doing it this time, so it’s fine.”

No hesitation at all with that answer! Just look, this is what my little sister is like!

The setup for this protagonist Rino or whatever continued as follows:

Very pure personality. Love is very important to her, and she is easily hurt. She has a super cute little sister.

Hm? She wasn't a bitch? And she had a very pure personality?

Geez, I seriously don't get how she thinks at all...

And she had a super cute little sister? That's just the author blatantly inserting her own hobbies into the work, wasn't it?

The little sister's name is "Shiori-chan."

And what's more, the little sister's inspiration came from an eroge.

Boyfriend 1. His name is Tetsu. He suddenly dies after being hit by a dump truck. He's a rough type, but occasionally has a nice side. *This is his first time dating a girl, so he isn't sure what to do. ←- Isn't that cute?

Boyfriend 2. Name is Kazu. Thirty-two years old. Young president of a start-up company. Actually already has a wife and children. His adultery is exposed to his wife and his company, and he throws the protagonist away. His social life falls into ruin. Maybe he kills himself? He's very good at ecchi things. Suit moe type. He treats dating the protagonist like a game, but occasionally can get serious. Has the air of an adult male. Isn't it cool that the protagonist can manipulate a man like that?

Occasionally can get serious. ←- I can't see that as anything short of lolicon.

And also, was it just me or were all the people she went out with dropping like flies? This went way beyond just being an unlucky sequence of events.⁵⁸

⁵⁸The term he uses is "sage-man," which refers to a type of story in which there is some girl that brings misfortune to all the boys she dates.

Boyfriend 3. Name is Toshi. Last person Rino gets involved with. Super good-looking. His parents are rich, but he doesn't want to use their money so he is poor. High school, second year. Men's Non-No model.⁵⁹ ←- He spends all his money from his job on his band. He's the lead vocalist in a band. He can also play the guitar. Blonde hair. Grades are the best in his class. Captain of the soccer team.⁶⁰

I can't take this... what the hell is up with this male version of Kirino?!

Incredibly kind and prone to worrying. He loves the protagonist, but does not want to admit it.

He tries his very best at everything, and doesn't give up even in the face of great adversity.

“.....”

I read the descriptions to the end, scowling the entire way. Following the character descriptions, the story was outlined in bullet point form. In the prologue the first boyfriend gets hit by the truck, and then she gets caught up with and thrown away by the lolicon company president, and then she self-destructs and gets involved with compensated dating... well, it matched well with the data we had been collecting. And if you ask what happens after that, after she hit rock bottom, she meets with a new person. This Toshi or whatever. That person is very kind, cool, and is a super perfect person. He scolds Rino about her compensated dating habits and gets her to stop, and goes out of his way in various ways to help her out.

Of course, at that point Rino had lost her faith in men, so at first she doesn't trust Toshi. Rather, initially she just shouts terrible things at him and tries to distance herself from him. But Toshi persevered and continued to stick with her. Because her previous boyfriends had all died or fallen into ruin, rumors were circulating that Rino was jinxed, but he didn't mind those rumors at all. He treats her with care and gives her advice, and marches into the places where the rumors have been circulating and gets seriously angry about it in her place.

... This is ridiculous. I'll be damned if such a convenient guy exists for a girl like that!

⁵⁹Think the type of magazine Kirino models for, and flip all the genders.

⁶⁰Kirino's novel would fail a Mary Sue test so, so, so badly.

Also, as I read this plot outline, for some reason I began to get incredibly annoyed. I wonder why...

Also, after that, the outline continued as follows. I'm getting tired of summarizing everything for you, so I'll just quote it verbatim.

Having her heart finally opened, Rino begins to date Toshi and stops her involvement with compensated dating, beginning on an honest path.

Even so, one day, Toshi gets hit by a car and loses his memories.

He gets that way by protecting Rino, and even then, he falls in love with Rino once again.

Having lost his precious memories, Toshi continues on with Rino.

And then, one day, Rino gets raped. Even so, Toshi still loves Rino, comforts her, and supports her.

And then, one day, Toshi gets leukemia. Because he is hospitalized, Rino becomes very lonely and has an affair. (←- Toshi's close friend seduces her. He has always liked Rino, and because Toshi has been reduced to this state, he thinks that she can make him happy instead. ←- This love triangle creates drama.)⁶¹

..... What a cruel story. It was seriously a cruel story. This is getting difficult to read.

What kind of cruel fate has been put on Toshi's shoulders?

Hearing about his good friend's betrayal, Toshi tries to back out of the relationship himself. But in the end Rino loves Toshi, and doesn't care that he's sick, and tells him she wants to be by his side. Toshi's close friend who had betrayed

⁶¹Wait, you missed the part where his evil identical octuplet kidnaps his girlfriend because she's actually his third cousin! ... And "she's" also actually a boy... and a llama.

him dies from a motorcycle accident that night.

“Hey, Kirino, have you decided on a title yet?”

“I haven’t yet... but the words ‘Little Sister’ will definitely be in it.”

“The little sister is only in the character descriptions and hasn’t shown up even a bit in the story!”

“After this, she’ll appear as a super important character!”

Uh-huh. Geez, wouldn’t a more appropriate title be “The Girl Who Invites Disaster” or something?

She clearly invited death and misfortune, this Rino-san. And every single damn character just acted so purely in the moment without any planning whatsoever.

Haah... at this rate, I really wonder what kind of bad ending awaits...

Rino and Toshi wept together. They decided to spend what little time they had left together.

And? The boyfriend dies? No matter how I looked at it, this was a pretty gloomy-

At the last second, the power of love cures Toshi of all illness. Happy ending.

“... You’ve got to be kidding me.”

I almost did a spit take.

“Huh? You got a problem with the plot I worked out?”

“Agh... It’s this last line! Even if I give you the benefit of the doubt and ignore the story so far, no matter what that last line is just impossible! You just thought it was too hard to write a proper ending so you gave up, didn’t you?! At least think the plot through to the end!”

“I did think about it!!!!!!!!!!!!!! You have no idea what you’re talking about. Lately, readers really want happy endings!”

“Even so...! I’m just a novice but even I can see this is bad!”

“It’ll definitely be alright! You just think like that because you’re reading the outline! Once everything’s written out it’ll be fine! I mean, this type of ending happens in a lot of famous eroges! Having the poor heroine on the brink of death, but then reviving her in a flash of light is a staple pattern of emotional eroges! I was just applying that technique to cell phone novels! Do you understand?!”

“.....”

Jesus! Where the hell is this confidence coming from?! Whatever, just do what you want!

Now I understand perfectly what Kuroneko meant when she told me she wanted to kill you!

While our argument was unfolding, we continued to walk, passing by the side of the Tokyu and headed in the direction of Maruyama-cho.⁶² We turned off the main street into an alleyway, and our surroundings gradually became more and more shady.

Basically, around there the walls began to become specked with obscene graffiti, and suspicious looking hotels also began to pop up... where exactly were we headed?

At that moment, I heard a voice in front of me. “Would those with reference number up to B100 please proceed inside in order!” Now that I looked at it, there were quite a few long lines set up here.

⁶²Nice quiet residential district next to Shibuya. Lots of good small restaurants.

I was reminded of Comiket for a moment, but there's no way something like that would be happening in Shibuya.

It seemed that the line in front of me was for a live music club.

I see, the next place we're gathering data from... is over there.

"... Alright, for the time being, I'll agree that... you thought out the plot to the very end."

But... could I just ask one question? There's just one thing that's been really bothering me.

"... Kirino... this guy... Toshi? About him..."

"What?"

"Why does he go so far for this damn woman?"

I couldn't think of any other reason than plain masochism.

"Well, that's..."

Kirino seemed to want to respond instantly, but stopped right on the edge of making her answer for some reason. For a while, she sunk deep into thought and searched for the right words... and finally said the following with a stern expression:

"... Because he loves her, right?"

"Tch."

Dammit. What the hell is she saying?

3.13 Third Chapter Part Thirteen

Having walked in the direction of Maruyama-cho, we ducked into a live music club as part of our data collection quest, and watched a live performance by a popular rock band called “Shiva” or something. It seemed that Kirino really wanted to base the band that Toshi and his close friend made in the story off of them, so she closely watched the performance, burning the experience into her memory. As for me, this just seemed like a terribly noisy place. It wasn’t a place that meshed well with me at all.

I had also thought this about summer Comiket, but I never wanted to come back here. It was incredibly tiring.

Hm... I guess part of the reason Kirino invited me on this trip on Christmas Eve especially was to see this band’s Christmas performance.

Things had been going relatively smoothly up until this point. Sure, I had been dragged all around by my sister and I was completely exhausted, but on the other hand, I didn’t see how anything more terrible could happen past this point. I had forgotten completely about how we had met Ayase on the road home from Comiket, or how Kirino’s hobby had gotten exposed to our parents that one time.

Of course, that was nothing more than groundless optimism.

A terrifying, surprising event was waiting for me just around the corner.

The live performance ended, and we were exiting the building.

“Alright.”

Kirino seemed to have thought of something, and ran towards a convenience store on the other side of the street.

“... What’s up with her?”

As I watched her with my hands thrust into my pockets, I saw my sister return clutching two water-filled buckets. With a heave-ho, heave-ho, she slowly walked back to my location.

It seems that they were buckets she had borrowed from the shopkeeper...

“Hey Kirino... what exactly do you plan on doing with those things?”

She’s not going to go and sprinkle the streets over there, right...?

“D-Don’t tell me you’re going to throw all that water on me...”

“Why would I do that?”

I-I see... I see... as expected, even she wouldn’t do something as cruel as that.

Haah... I calmed down, and then...

Splash! I heard the sound of water reverberated through the air.

“Wha-”

The origin of the sound of water was...

“... What the hell are you doing?!”

I was completely taken aback, and my eyes opened wide in astonishment as I shouted.

Right in front of me, I saw the soaked form of my sister. Her hair clung to her face, and her wet clothes dripped with cold water. It was a tragic sight to behold.

The water sound that I heard before was Kirino dumping the buckets full of water on herself.

“.....”

Completely soaked, Kirino seemed to completely ignore my words and the stares people were sending her way. She walked to the wall of the live music club, and plopped herself down onto the ground.

“..... Haah..... haah.....”

She settled into the fetal position, with her arms hugging her knees, and began to shiver. Her breath solidified into a pure white in front of her.

It was the middle of December. The sun had gone down, and the temperature had precipitously dropped.

And that water must have been freezing...!

All the guests exiting the live music club were also shocked at Kirino's strange action.

I have no idea what she was doing! What the hell is she trying to achieve here?!

My thoughts had been thrown completely into chaos, but... I only hesitated for a second.

“Y-You big idiot! I'm going to go bring a towel, so-”

“Don't.”

“What?!”

Turning around, I showed my teeth, not even trying to hide my irritation.

Of course, I had been surprised at my sister’s actions, but my anger came before that.

I had no idea what reason she had for doing what she did, but she really shouldn’t do such stupid things in front of her brother.

And what’s more, this idiot sister responded like that while she shivered there on the ground... so I was surprised.

“... I-I still don’t know what the protagonist was feeling... so just wait a second.”

“Don’t screw with me! Are you an idiot?!”

I shouted on reflex. Even now, I couldn’t make head or tails of what my sister was saying. What? What did you say...? You don’t understand what the protagonist was feeling...?

“What are you talking about? You... are you saying this is also part of the data collecting?”

You’re completely soaked and shivering! I have no idea what you mean! Your breath is condensing into such a pure white too... just stop what you’re doing right now! I can’t watch this! Geez...

“... On Christmas Eve, Rino gets soaked by the rain and waits for her boyfriend even though she knows he won’t come... that kind of scene exists... so... to collect data for that...”

“Shut up! Come on! Just put this on!”

I took off the jacket I had on, and forcibly draped it onto my sister as she sat there.



Next, I glared at the people around us, trying to chase away the curious onlookers. Fortunately, faced with my serious anger, the onlookers checked themselves and the strange stares and sneers directed at Kirino somewhat lessened in intensity.

“And then a towel... umm...”

Rushing into the convenience store, I quickly bought a towel and returned.

And then, I put the towel to my sister's face as she sat there silently looking downwards, wiping her face fanatically.

“W-Wait... don't touch me in weird places...!”

“I'm wiping you off, dammit!!”

I can't believe she doesn't let up her abusive mouth even in a situation like this.

Also... what should I do? Her wet clothes are sucking up her body warmth more than I envisioned, and she'll catch a cold at this rate... was there a public bath house around here somewhere?

Completely flustered, I tried to work out a plan, when Kirino began to tug at my sleeve.

She called out to me with her face pale.

“I-It's cold...”

“No kidding!”

You idiot, you were the one who poured water over yourself, so why are you saying that all of a sudden?! You complete dumbass!

You didn't think about the consequences of your actions at all, did you?! No matter how serious you say you are, there are just lines you do not cross!!

She even ruined the outfit she had so carefully chosen for today...

"The scene where Rino and Toshi first meet... she was sitting after being soaked in the rain... and was found by Toshi as he left a live music club... I thought a scene like that would be interesting..."

"..... Tch."

She had told me to get hit by a dump truck, and to get amnesia, and those kinds of absurd things...

But she really might have been serious when she said all of that.

I mean, she's straining herself and doing such unreasonable things to her own body...

In a way, being able to go so far to pursue her goals... that was pretty damn impressive.

Well, sorry, but I still can't comprehend why she did what she did. I mean, I can't help but be put off by her actions.

I mean, honestly, it was a pretty unpleasant situation. Don't you think so?

"H-Hey...?"

"Hm? I'm thinking about what to do from here, so just wait for a se-... what?"

"T-The next place for data... is over there."

"You still want to do that even now...?"

Kirino's voice was firm and she pointed somewhere, and dumbfounded, I turned in the direction she was pointing...

“W-W-Wha...?!?”

Completely shocked, I bit my tongue. Looking up at the blue building Kirino was pointing at, I began to tremble hard.

Yes... I think people familiar with these parts already know, but the area around here was the so-called “Love Hotel City.”

“A-Are you an idiot?! Why does a brother and his sister have to go into a place like that?!”

“D-Don't shout out that we're brother and sister like that! ... *Achoo!* After Toshi finds Rino drenched in the rain, it's natural that they would go to a love hotel, right? B-Because, besides, there's no other place she can take a shower... *Achoo!*”

“OooOooooOOoo..... Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaghhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!”

I should have never come here! I should have never come to Shibuya with my little sister!

3.14 Third Chapter Part Fourteen

And so... we've returned to where this story began. Do you see now why I'm here sitting on this bed in a love hotel, waiting for my sister to finish showering? By the way, perhaps because it was the night of Christmas Eve, all the love hotels were pretty much fully booked, so even though we managed to get a room we had gone through a lot of trouble to get one.

“Haah.... Geez... I'm beat...”

How far did she want to go to collect data? If you thought about this situation calmly, this definitely isn't normal, right?

Also, just wait a second. In the cell phone novel she's writing, after the protagonist gets out of the shower... there's no way... nothing would happen... and they'd just check out, right?

If she wants to do a simulation... uhh... exactly how far is she planning to take it?

“..... Uwah.”

Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!

I just imagined something disgusting. Really damn disgusting... but there's no reason that would happen, right?! That's insane!!

As I listened to the sound of flowing water in the next room, I was seized by a sense of discomfort I could not express.

How long is she planning to shower?! Hurry up and finish, you dumbass!

And then, I heard my phone go off. The cell phone in my back pocket began to vibrate.

“Uwah.”

That surprised me. Who's it from? When I looked at the LCD screen, I saw “Tamura Manami” displayed.

Feeling just as if a saving hand had been extended to me, I picked up the phone.

“Hey. What's up?”

“Ah, Kyou-chan? You picked up, thank goodness...”

“Hm? You sound like you have been trying to call me for a while or something.”

“Y-Yeah... sorry for being so persistent.”

“I don’t mind. I’m sorry for not realizing you were calling me. Well, what did you need?”

“A-Ahh... that is...”

What a strange person. Why is she so nervous even around me?

“What?”

“U-Umm... hey... Kyou-chan... those plans you told me you had at school today... are they done?”

“Nah... still ongoing.”

It really is pretty hard to say that I came to Shibuya today with my sister. At my rather vague response, Manami gave me an “..... I see” and continued as follows:

“.... Around what time..... do you think you’ll be back?”

“I have no idea, but I’ll probably be back by nine-thirty.”

My parents are probably wondering where we went out to after all. Although now that I think about it, today mother probably asked father out on a Christmas date, so today was the only day in the year where we’d probably be fine even if we broke curfew.

If that wasn’t true, I don’t think she would be spending her Christmas Eve with the older brother she hates so much.

“A-Ahh...”

“What’s wrong?”

“I-I.... I also made Kyou-chan’s portion... so maybe... if you could... if you could drop by after your plans are over... that would make me happy.”

Her voice gradually became harder and harder to hear.

“Ah, I see. If I have time I’ll stop by then.”

“Ah, thank you.”

Why in the world are you the one thanking me? Shouldn’t it be the other way around?

Manami continued to hesitate with a number of “Umm”s, and then asked the following:

“K-Kyou-chan... c-could it be... right now... you’re with a girl...?”

“.....”

Ah, I see. So she’s made some weird misunderstanding then. Although geez, it took me a while to figure that out, didn’t it! Was this the reason Manami had been acting strange before as well?! Uwaah, not good... h-how should I answer her?

I mean, there’s no way I can just answer truthfully and go “Ahhh, well I’m here in Shibuya with my little sister at a love hotel.” If I did that, before I could explain the situation to her she would just make a more terrible misunderstanding... ugh, this isn’t good.

“W-Why aren’t you answering?”

Oh crap. If I keep silent, she's going to jump to some weird conclusion all by herself...

I guess I have no choice. I'll just leave out the parts that she might misunderstand and tell her the truth.

"Nah, I'm with my sister."

"Sister... Kirino-chan?"

"Yeah."

"So, soo tonight you're on a Christmas date with Kirino-chan?"

I really don't want you to put it like that, though. But if I think about it, that's pretty much what we're doing.

"It's not really a date... we just went shopping for some things and saw a live band. That kind of stuff."

"Well, that's a date, isn't it?"

Shut up. I don't care what you say, it's not like that.

"But, I understand. If that's the case, make sure to have lots of fun with Kirino-chan."

Manami seemed to have readily accepted the situation. I let out a relieved sigh.

Gaaaaa

“Phew... after that shower I finally feel refreshed. It’s waaarm. Hey, in love hotel bathrooms, the lights are rainbow colored! I never knew that before!”

You idiot! What the hell are you saying, and what the hell is up with this God-awful timing?!

“... Kyo-KyoKyoKyoKyoKyo-chan...? Where are you right now with Kirino-chan...?”

“Oh no, I think the signal’s going, I can’t hear you...!!!”

Click. I cut off the phone call and turned the phone off.

Haah, haah, haah, haah... I was covered in cold sweat, and I gulped down a mouthful of saliva.

Crap, does she suspect something now...? She seemed to have figured out the situation...

And not being able to think up an excuse, I had immediately cut off the call...

“Haah...”

I’m so beat... How the hell am I supposed to clear up the misunderstanding that happened just now...?!

This is bad. No matter how I think about it. What kind of brother goes with his real little sister to a love hotel on Christmas Eve?

And also, I really was at a love hotel with my sister, so it’s not like it was really a misunderstanding! Dammmiiiiiiiiit....!!

I cradled my head in my hands in agony, when I heard Kirino’s voice.

“... What? Who were you on the phone with?”

“Shut up! Everything is your fault! What the hell?! Now my childhood friend thinks I’m doing something terrible! Everything’s over, dammit!”

“What do you mean ‘what the hell’...? I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about...”

As the smell of soap came off of Kirino, she spoke.

“Why don’t you just quick load and choose another option?”

“This isn’t an erogé dammit!”

If only I could do something like that...!

And then...

“W-What the hell are you wearing...?”

The minute I lifted my head up from my almost-crying position, I stiffened. If you ask why, it’s because my sister was standing there in nothing but a bathrobe.

“G-Gross. Don’t look at me that way. It’s not like I have a choice, since my clothes are not dry yet. Stop looking at me so blankly and go the hairdryer or something to dry my clothes.”

“Ah, so that’s what it is. Sorry about the misunderstanding.”

I picked up the hairdryer Kirino had been using and began to dry her wet clothes.

Why is it that while I’m suffering this amount of abuse, I’m here drying my sister’s camisole?

“Hmph. Don’t tell me that you were getting aroused seeing your little sister in a bathrobe? This is why siscons are so... agh, gross gross.”

“You’re the only person I don’t want to hear that from!”

And I meant that in two different ways!

My retort went in one ear and out the other, and Kirino quickly turned the other way. And then, my sister, still only clothed in the bathrobe, began to wander around the middle of the room. She opened and closed the surrounding drawers, and flipped through some of the pamphlets on the desk... she then took out her cell phone and began to play with it. Occasionally, I heard the sound of a camera shutter, so it seems that she was taking photos.

“W-What are you doing?”

“Taking some data down.”

She’s still collecting data after all that...? She said that the next data collection point was here... I guess she was serious about that.

She’s really being thorough... seeing that zeal from the side really gives me an unpleasant feeling.

While Kirino continued to wander around the room taking notes, she opened one of the pamphlets in the room.

“About the storyline for the novel... remember how I said it seemed like there would need to be a prostitution scene?”

“.... Y-Yeah... so?”

“Could you call this prostitute line for me? For the data of course.”

“Don’t make me smack you!”

Dammit. My little sister always goes way beyond anything I could possibly imagine....!!

3.15 Third Chapter Part Fifteen

Of course, I never called that number.

After that, we exited the love hotel and walked towards the station through the nighttime streets.

Let’s look back on today.

Take our shopping trip to Shibuya, or the live music club, or the love hotel...

This was probably what modern girls generally would think about when they thought “Christmas date.” Being forced to go on all these ridiculous data collection trips was unpleasant, but it was certainly a novel experience. I would never find myself in these kinds of places normally, after all.

“You’d do well to remember the course we followed today. You might be able to use it someday. If you had to plan a date yourself, there’s no question that it would turn out to be some incredibly boorish experience. For example, going to a local department store or something...”

“.....”

Pretty amazing. How did she know what I did last year for Christmas?

“Boys who bring their dates to a K*C⁶³ on Christmas Eve should just die.”

“Students don’t have money, you know! Give us a break!”

And what’s wrong with K*C?! Isn’t that standard?! Right, everyone?!

And like that... even though there were a bunch of hiccups along the way, Kirino seemed absurdly happy right now.

It was like that time she had gone to Akihabara. Which means...

Going around Shibuya and buying clothes and earrings and etc.

Going around Akihabara and buying games and doujinshi and etc.

She liked them both.

She says it every time, doesn’t she...? If she’s missing either of those, she wouldn’t be herself anymore.

“So, was the data collection a success?”

I suddenly asked that question as we walked through the lit up streets.

The response soon came.

“I guess it went alright. I suppose I can say it was worth taking up Christmas Eve to do this.”

“Ah, is that so?”

⁶³Lol, the novel bleeped out one of the characters in this to prevent copyright infringement.

I'm glad then.

“Whaat? ... Don't be gross.”

“Heh, it's nothing.”

It's just that, I was surprised at myself.

Surprised at how fast time went by.

This... what was this...?

This is the first time I've gone out with my little sister like this...

This... it wasn't bad... I think... or something... no, no no no no.

Hah, this is so unlike me. There's no reason to think like that. Being handled this unreasonably and thinking that it wasn't bad... that's exactly what a masochist would say.

And like that, our data collection session came to an end. On the train back, my sister immersed herself in thought, mumbling all the while. She might have been quickly trying to work out the plan for her novel.

I guess she was fine with how things turned out? I have no idea.

And the next day was Christmas. Kirino seemed to have already quickly begun to work on her cell phone novel.

And then... after the closing ceremonies at school, winter break arrived.

3.16 Third Chapter Part Sixteen

New Year's Eve had passed, and a new year had dawned. It was the morning of New Year's Day.

I passed my mother after going down the stairs, so I thought I'd wish her a happy New Year.

"Hey, Happy New Year's Mom. Give me some New Year's money."

"Why do I have to give my son New Year's money?"

Wasn't that the custom? How cold. She said it so naturally too...

Well, it's not like I was surprised. The eldest son in the Kousaka household only got money on New Year's up until elementary school.

Not fair, right? Especially since Kirino is still getting money for New Year's even now... I feel a bit of favoritism here.

"But more importantly, you're going to visit the shrine today with Manami, right? Do you have enough time?"

"Plenty of time."

I waved off her worries with one hand, but when I tried to slip past her, she caught me by the wrist.

"Wait just a second, I still have something I want to ask you about."

"... What?"

“About that. That.”

My mother opened the living room door a tad, and gestured inside. In there, in her usual position on the couch, Kirino was hard at work typing on her cell phone.

“Whenever she has free time, I see her playing on her phone. Do you know what she’s doing?”

“Not really.”

Sorry, but at this point, I still couldn’t tell my mother that Kirino was writing a cell phone novel.

As I played dumb, my mother put a hand on her cheek and looked worried.

“I’ve told you right, that near the end of the year, she gets really busy? Even though school is on break, she has to go to track practice and has a lot of modeling work to do... It’s nice that she’s doing so much to make us proud, unlike you, but it would be nice if she would at least take it easy when she’s at home... it seems like she’s not getting enough sleep too, and whenever I ask her about it she won’t tell me... the other day, I saw her fiddling with her phone in the bath too! I was so surprised...”

Exactly. After that data collecting date, Kirino had begun walking around at home all the time with her cell phone. In the living room, the hallway, the stairs... at every break she could be seen tap tap tap tapping on the keys of her phone. She was basically like that up until New Year’s Eve, so I’m not surprised that she was also writing her book in the tub.

“What’s more, she seems to have had a cold for a while now. She felt warm even this morning...”

“Eh... seriously?”

“Seriously. Absolutely seriously. So I’m worried. I don’t know what she’s trying so hard to do right now, but she needs to think about her own health first and foremost. But no

matter how much I tell her this, it's like talking to a brick wall. Haah, she really gets her stubbornness from a certain someone, I think..."

... Uwaah. That idiot. She might not have told mother, but I knew exactly where she caught that cold. In the cold of winter, she had poured water over herself like that... don't say I didn't warn her.

I peeked into the living room. If I look carefully, it really looks like she's having a hard time, that one. Her face looks red, and her breath ragged... and she occasionally falls into a coughing fit... she's definitely pushing herself too far.

Hm? It's not like I'm worried, you know. Even though I had accompanied her on her data collection, this concerned a world that I had nothing to do with. What my sister does is none of my business.

It's just that... well... my mother had already mentioned it, but she had to go to track practice, worry about her modeling job, play eroge, and had various other things she had to do as well.

"Well, I'll figure it out. After all, who do you think I am?"

She had even said something like that... but it's already falling apart, isn't it?

In your case, it's because you're so devoted that I feel that way... by "that," I don't mean I'm worried, alright?

"Kyouzuke... do you really not know anything?"

"Yeah, I seriously don't know. And I mean, lately I haven't said a single word to her. You know that, don't you?"

"Mm, I guess that's true. Even though I thought you two were finally getting along a bit... what happened? Did you get into another argument?"

“... Leave me alone.”

In short, our business with each other was already settled. Because she had wanted life advice, I had went with her to Shinjuku and then to Shibuya, and that session had already finished.

Yes. My role in this play was over, and the rest of it was her problem.

Our relationship now was like it was the latter half of last year's summer break, when Kirino was incredibly busy. In other words, we didn't talk to each other, did not consult each other for anything, and in general just ignored each other.

In a way, I was pretty grateful for this state of affairs. Because of that, I didn't have to worry about being dragged to winter Comiket, and could spend January peacefully. It's been quite a while since I could enjoy this type of beautiful tranquility.

“.... Ha, I feel refreshed.”

I watched my sister as she continued to type on her phone with a feverish looking face.

... Geez, don't go overboard, alright?

Is what I silently muttered in my mind.

3.17 Third Chapter Part Seveteen

“A cell phone novel? Ooooo... Kirino-chan is pretty amazing.”

“Not really... but she does seem like she's working hard at it. She doesn't want our parents to know, so keep it a secret, alright?”

“Alright, I will.”

Manami and I were walking together to our first shrine visit of the year and talking about my sister.

My sister didn't seem to especially care about keeping her novel writing a secret from anybody other than our parents, so I didn't hold myself back and used it as fodder for small talk with Manami.

Well, it's not like she was trying to write a huge hit, or something she could be proud about and hold dear, and on the other hand, it's not like it was particularly embarrassing either.

According to Kirino, those weren't the ways in which junior high school girls looked at cell phone novels.

Sure, you could point out that cell phone novels have been made into movies and manga, and so they have to be absurdly prevalent.

But it's not like that. Works like that one with a two word title... or that one, Deep⁶⁴ or whatever... these rare works that exploded in popularity just made a temporary cell phone novel bubble.

Well, to the very end, a magazine is a magazine. It's a world I have nothing to do with.

When I stopped talking, Manami timidly began to speak.

“Kyou-chan... this outfit... what do you think?”

In a very January-like-style, Manami was wearing a light violet kimono. It stunk of an old woman's fashion sense, but...

⁶⁴Deep Love, a cell phone novel that was very popular.

“Traditional clothing really does suit you...”

I’ve always been impressed with just that. She wasn’t that pretty, but her appeal almost tripled when she was like this.

“... R-Really?”

“Yeah. You really should just wear that outfit always.”

“E-Ehh?”

Manami didn’t seem displeased, but instead appeared to be somewhat happily embarrassed.

Putting on a wry smile at her actions, I rewrapped the scarf around my neck that had come undone. This scarf was something Manami had given to me Christmas night. She had passed it along to me when we had stopped by her house on the way back from our data collection trip.

Manami looked at me wrapped shyly in that scarf. “We match, don’t we...?”

Keh. Spitting that out, I quickened my pace and tried to leave my childhood friend behind.

Even though Manami was in a kimono, she was also wrapped in a checkered scarf that I had given to her on Christmas Eve. When I had gone with Kirino to 109, I had bought it as a present for Manami. And then something absurd happened. Just listen and be surprised, but the scarf I bought for Manami and the scarf she had sewn for me had essentially the same color and patterning. Ugh, how embarrassing, it’s as if we were a couple and I had been forced into a matching outfit. Even though that wasn’t my intention at all...

Wearing it over her kimono even though it didn’t match... walking together with matching scarves like this, we looked like nothing but two lovebirds. If I meet someone I know, what am I going to do? Geez.

“W-Wait for me~.”

Having been left behind, Manami half ran and caught up with me. I increased my speed even further and tried to run away, but right then I stopped in my tracks.

“W-What’s wrong?”

“Ahh... look at that.”

I pointed in front of me with my eyes half-closed. By the river were stopped a number of cars with tinted windows. I felt like I had seen similar cars somewhere before, when just as I thought, three or four girls dressed in kimonos came out from inside the vehicles.

“Ah, are they having another photo-shoot or something...? Hey, remember half a year ago when we were at the park...?”

“Yeah, it looks like that. From how they’re dressed, I think they’re doing it at that shrine over there.”

“I see... H-Hey... isn’t that Ayase-chan?”

“Ugeh?!”

Reacting immediately to that name, my back straightened and stiffened.

Creases formed in my brow and I looked around frantically, when... there she was. She was right there. Wearing a blue kimono, her black hair tied up, and looking just as outrageously attractive as she always did...

Aragaki Ayase. She was a junior high student, as well as Kirino’s close friend, classmate, and modeling coworker.

I’ll skip the details, but I was terrible when it came to dealing with her. Call us natural

enemies if you want.

After all, to her, I was a “Siscon hentai who loved my little sister” and a “weird otaku who only collected little sister eroge and doujinshi.”

And what’s more, every time we met, all she said were things like “I’ll kill you” or “How do I report you to the police?”

At any rate, I had no desire to meet with her face to face. Fortunately, she didn’t appear to have noticed our presence yet, so let’s take this opportunity to slip awa-

“Ayase-chaan~!”

“D-Don’t wave and call out to her!!”

“Hm? Why? Kyou-chan gets along pretty well with that girl, doesn’t he...?”

Well... that was before that sad affair happened! Ahhh crap, she noticed us! And she’s hurrying over here...

“Hey, Oneesan, it’s been a while! Happy New Years!”

“A-Ahh... Happy New Years. It really has been a while... almost half a year, right?”

This plain-looking girl seemed to be overpowered and dazzled by the aura of beauty Ayase was giving off.

Well, don’t call her over then. As I turned a resentful look towards Manami, Ayase greeted me suggestively.

“Oniisan, it’s also been a while, hasn’t it? Happy New Years! How has it been with Kirino lately? Ahahah, you two have been getting along, haven’t you?”

There was no doubt that behind her cheerful smile, she was preparing to kill me if I gave the wrong response.

“Ahh... we haven’t been bad, I guess.”

When I nervously sent her back a vague response, Manami stepped in to help.

“Ahah, what are you saying, Kyou-chan? Haven’t you been really getting along with Kirino lately? For instance, during Christmas...”

D-D-Don’t say too much, dammit!!

“Christmas? Hmm, I’m quite interested in that. I want to hear the details!”

Her smile was damn scary! And her smile didn’t reach her eyes at all!

“Ah. During Christmas they went out together, and went to a public bathhouse called ‘Rabu Hotaru.’”⁶⁵

“... Hmm, a bathhouse on Christmas?”

Ayase stared at me, as if she wanted to say “what kind of a choice was that?”

Noisy, isn’t she?! But it’s not like I could tell Manami that I went to a love hotel with my sister! So I lied to her and made up that story! I know! It was a pretty lame excuse!

“W-Well anyways. That kimono really looks great on you! As expected from a model! Hahaha!”

When I tried to prevent her from pursuing the topic...

⁶⁵Just in case you missed it, love hotel is “Rabu Hoteru” in Japanese.

“.....”

An uncomfortable silence fell upon us. Her stare is so cold.... she probably is still holding a grudge about having her Christmas invitation rejected by Kirino.

“Well, alright. Oh, right, oniisan, I wanted to talk to you about Kirino... she’s been in such poor shape lately, but she still...”

“Ahh, I know. But it’s useless just talking to her about that.”

“I know, but... heh, so not even oniisan can do anything about it?”

“... I should be saying the same thing. So not even you can do anything about it?”

That exchanged allowed Ayase and I to form an unspoken agreement with each other.

Manami, being the only one left out of the loop, cocked her head in puzzlement.

From how Ayase was acting, it seemed that Kirino... she was acting the same way outside the house as well.

About what, you ask? About her cell phone novel, of course.

“It really is hopeless, isn’t it? She said that such a little cold wouldn’t have an impact on her work, and she definitely wasn’t going to take a leave... of course, I respect her stance on work, and it’s pretty amazing that she doesn’t look sick in the least during the photo shoots. But it’s clear she’s working herself too hard... and she doesn’t listen when I tell her to stop either... I’m seriously worried about her.”

Ayase cast her face downwards while she spoke and looked at me through upturned eyes, biting her upper lip in frustration.



“... Please, look after her when she’s at home too.”

“I will. Thanks.”

My little sister was the kind of person who wouldn’t neglect what she had to do no matter what kind of situation she was in. That’s something I realized and has been ingrained into my mind since those tumultuous events that one time.

How do I put it... no matter what, she wouldn’t cut corners. You could call this side of her naïve... but she really was a troublesome girl. And completely stubborn to a fault.

Once she set her mind on something, nobody could change it, so we had no choice but to just leave her be...

But you asshole, don’t make your friends worry, dammit.

3.18 Third Chapter Part Eighteen

Kirino finished writing her cell phone novel a bit after winter break ended. It was around twenty days after our data collection session had concluded. I’m not sure if that counted as fast or not for writing a cell phone novel. But, I didn’t have to read her novel to know that she had really devoted herself to finishing it.

Even if I don’t read it... all I have to do is look at what’s in front of me.

“..... Gu.....”

Kirino was collapsed on the living room desk, grasping her cell phone tightly in one hand and fast asleep.

On the desk and around that area were scattered a number of empty energy drink bottles.

Seeing my sister without her makeup on lying there with her face in that sorry state made me wonder how she could still do modeling work in this condition.

I mean, there were huge bags under her eyes. That can't be good...

Well, from what Ayase told me, there was no modeling work to be done for a while, so she could probably forgive herself for looking like this. But even then, it was extremely rare for her to work herself to the limit like this, to the point where she would allow herself to be seen in this condition by me. Or rather, this was the first time something like that had happened.

“..... Heh, well, what can I say...”

You really did your best, Kirino.

I softly mumbled to myself while draping a blanket across her back.

4 Fourth Chapter



4.1 Fourth Chapter Part One

It had been around a week after Kirino finished the manuscript of her cell phone novel, and it was the annoying morning of the opening ceremonies for the new semester.

Having pushed herself so hard, just as I thought, Kirino's cold had taken a turn for the worse, and it seemed that she had been confined to bed. I say "it seemed" because Kirino's fever was at the point where she even took her meals in her room, so we didn't have any opportunities to meet each other.

I was in the middle of eating breakfast, and my mother spoke up to me while looking depressed.

"Kyouzuke~. That girl, she still has a fever but she insists on going to school~."

"... At any rate, she probably has club activities or is grumbling about missing work."

"Yes yes, that's what she's doing... haah, she doesn't listen at all... her dad is trying to convince her to stay home right now."

I'm not surprised. That idiot, she's the only one to blame for how she is right now.

Well, it's not like she can cure her cold with willpower alone, so she'll probably end up obediently staying home today after father talks with her.

Tch. I'm pretty sure that whether tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, until her fever cools down she's going to just keep grumbling about wanting to go to school.

All I could say was... geez.

"We're worried, so we want to take her to go see a doctor today. The flu's been going around lately."

“Uh huh.”

I slurped my miso soup.

“... At the very least, I just hope she doesn't infect me with whatever she has.”

“Hmph, why are you so cold? You're her brother, aren't you?”

“Keh, it's none of my business.”

Is she an idiot? It's not like worrying is going to help Kirino get better.

4.2 Fourth Chapter Part Two

Having come back from school, I heard from mother that Kirino indeed had the flu. “Ah, alright,” pretty much summed up my honest feelings. What else could I possibly think?

Washing my hands more carefully than usual, I went up the stairs to the second floor.

“.....”

Hesitating a number of times, I finally knocked on my sister's door. She might have been sleeping, so I knocked quietly.

No response. As I thought, she was sleeping... I scratched my cheek and began to turn around, but right then, the door opened.

Even though I was so used to seeing the door open forcefully in an attempt to bang me in the face, just today the door opened meekly.

From the crack in the door, I saw the form of Kirino in pajamas staring back at me.

“... What?”

... What should I do? I didn't plan that far ahead. Why in the world did I knock in the first place?

Well it's not like I had any business with her... umm..... ugh..... well.....

“..... Um..... Do you want some yogurt?”

I held up the plastic bag I had in one of my hands. On the way home, I had stopped by the convenience store and bought it.

“.... Mm, I'll have one.”

Kirino's feverish looking head nodded, and she took the plastic bag from me. Her surprising sincerity was probably a result of her not being able to muster up enough energy to hurl insults at me. I'm being a bit sarcastic, but my little sister was all the more cuter like this, not being able to talk because she had the flu. I don't regret coming up here and giving her yogurt.

“Have you taken your medicine?”

“..... No.”

“..... Hurry up and take it.”

Right then, I noticed that Kirino was grasping her cell phone in her left hand.

“... What are you playing with your cell phone for?”

It couldn't be that she was still thinking about her novel and writing, right...?

“Don't be an idiot. Go get some sleep.”

“.....”

At my light scolding, Kirino seemed depressed and cast her eyes downwards.

Even though I understand she has a fever... this is... no matter how I look at it, she's just seems a bit too depressed here.

And also, I could see faint signs of what looked like crying on her cheeks.

“.... What's wrong?”

“.... Nothing.”

That's obviously a lie. Making light of your brother that much hurts, you know? It's pretty easy to understand just by looking at you. First and foremost, thinking about this rationally, there's no way that someone with such a high sense of responsibility and professionalism like her wouldn't be trying with all her strength to recover when she's taking a break from school like this.

“It's not nothing, idiot. If there's something you're worried about, spit it out. And after you do, go sleep. The faster you recover, the faster you can go back to doing your club activities and work, right?”

At my curt words, Kirino widened her eyes.

“... What's with you... you're being unusually nice.”



“Heh. If you don’t quickly get better, you’re going to infect me.”

I had meant that as somewhat of an insult...

But Kirino just gave a short sigh.

“You’re an idiot... well, whatever, come in. I don’t think the likes of you can do anything about it... but if you want to hear about it, I’ll tell you.”

“Yeah yeah.”

If I catch the flu after this, it’ll be completely my fault...

Having invited me into the room, Kirino sat on the bed and passed me her cell phone.

“This.”

“W-What...?”

Having a phone suddenly handed to me, I had no idea what to do. Looking at the screen, I saw the homepage of the “Cell Phone i-Club” site on the LCD display. There was a huge advertisement shown with the following provocative statement:

Cell Phone novel new rising star’s exciting hardcover debut! Picked up by Media Ascii Works! Full text open to the public now on the Cell Phone i-Club homepage!

It seems that this time, as a part of the sales promotion for this hardcover book that the Cell Phone i-Club was publishing, you could read the entire book from cover to cover on the net.

And by how they referred to the author as a “new rising star,” they seemed to have quite a lot of confidence in this work.

And so, this means...

“Could it be that this rising star person is you?! That’s amazing, really?!”

“.....”

Kirino didn’t respond. She stole back the cell phone from me, and coughing violently, pushed a few buttons and gave the phone back to me. I was now looking at the webpage for the cell phone novel this “rising star” had written.

The title was *Maisora*.⁶⁶

“Well, there’s no mistaking it anymore!”

I didn’t have to read any of it to know that this was precisely the cell phone novel Kirino had written.

The novel that Kirino had poured herself into was now sparkling in the spotlight.

Under the title of *Maisora*, there was a button labeled “Look at this title’s reviews,” and when I pushed that, I was taken to a page where large numbers of reviews of the work were lined up in a row.

“Great story!” “Made me want to cry.” “Pure love at its best.” “Coming from a real life girl, this was great.”

Etc. etc. Even though the novel had been released to the public just recently, there were already over a hundred reviews. And what’s more, they were all positive. From what I saw, the book had gotten especially strong support from the young girl demographic.

⁶⁶ “Mai” is written with the kanji for little sister, and “sora” with the kanji for sky.

... Well, this was pretty amazing, wasn't it?

I didn't say that, but I was definitely thinking it. Although, I still felt like it was a bit difficult to fully accept that Toshi and Rino's relationship was being received as "pure love" like the author had intended...

But I was deeply moved having accompanied my sister on her data collecting trip and watching her working so hard on the cell phone novel. To think that she had this kind of talent...

... Hah. She's gaining more ground on me again, isn't she? How much does she intend to leave her big brother behind in the dust...? It was a bit grating and pathetic... I felt pretty down about it.

As these self-deprecating and congratulatory thoughts ran through my head, I smiled... when I noticed something.

"Well, why do you look so depressed about this then...?"

Wasn't that strange? She had worked hard and her cell phone novel had been well received and was being hugely advertised and published, right? There was no reason to not be happy here... usually.

"...-on the book"

"Hm? What did you say?"

"I'm not the author listed on the book!"

Kirino yelled so loudly that she immediately fell into a coughing fit.

"H-Hey... are you alright?"

She looked to be in pain so I tried to rub her back, but my hand was quickly knocked away.

I couldn't get angry at her for doing that, seeing her coughing violently like that.

"What do you mean, you're not the author?"

Cough, cough... "L-Like I said, I was the one who wrote this book, but someone with a penname I had never seen before is listed as the author."

When I looked at it, certainly, right under the title the words "Author: Rino" appeared. The penname was the same as the name of the protagonist in *Maisora*. This was a pretty common tactic in cell phone novels, where they made it seem like the work was autobiographical.

"So, because the book would sell better if the author's name is the same as the protagonist's name, they changed the author's name from your name to this?"

"No! That's not it...!"

Still painfully coughing, my sister made it clear that if that were all, she wouldn't be making such a fuss about it.

"When I sent the password for the manuscript storage site to the editor, he stopped contacting me... even when I called the phone number on the business card I just got the voicemail... and when I emailed him I didn't get a response... and then at some point this webpage appeared..."

Manuscript storage site? ... Ah, I see. Cell phone novels were things where the text was maintained on your personal homepage for the novel site you registered for, like you would do on a blog.

"There was probably just a misunderstanding... things like that happen occasionally, right? Should I call their editing department to ask?"

“I already asked! I asked them why they hadn’t contacted me even though I was the one that wrote the novel... but they wouldn’t listen to me at all! They listened to my complaints, but they get this type of claim often, so they didn’t take me seriously... and they wouldn’t transfer me to the head editor. What’s more, the Cell Phone i-Club site where I was keeping all my data got its password changed, so I can’t even login anymore!!”

“So that means...”

It was a terrible chain of events. But if what I thought happened actually did happen, then it would be extremely cruel to make my sister confirm it out loud.

“So, your work was stolen? The editor you met with in Shinjuku before... he took your novel and put another author’s name on it and published it like that...?”

“.... That’s what I think... rather, that’s the only thing that could have happened.”

Kirino mumbled painfully while sitting on the bed.

Her face was red with fever, and her eyes were moist with bitter tears. Of all things that could have happened, to think she would meet with these kinds of troubles while being stricken with the flu... when it rained, it poured.

“So... what are you going to do about this? You’re not just going to take this lying down, right?”

“I’m not going to do anything.”

My sister’s response was unexpected.

“... Don’t misunderstand me. The only reason I’m telling you all this is because you told me to tell you. I don’t feel like doing... anything about these problems. And I mean, I’m not really bothered by them.”

“... Why?”

That’s a lie, isn’t it? You worked so hard, and all that hard work went to waste, didn’t it?

Someone like you who can’t stand to lose at all must be frustrated by all this.

“Why, you ask?”

Kirino sneered at me.

“That’s obvious, isn’t it? The thing I have to do right now is to put my all into getting rid of this disease and get back to work and club as soon as possible. Even if I were tricked, in the end the only person that’s going to get hurt by that is me, right? So, I don’t have time to care about this good-for-nothing situation. This isn’t the time for that. There are much more important things I have to worry about.”

She spoke with a haughty tone, as if she were looking down on everything in the world. To me, her words rang extremely hollow.

Cough, cough... Coughing a bit, Kirino continued.

“... I mean, it ticks me off that he was able to use me like that, so I really do want to kill that asshole. But at the same time, isn’t this just proof of my brilliant genius? The only reason he stole my work is because he saw so much value in it, right? Hmph, if he steals it, fine, I’ll just write another one. Something more amazing this time.”

Kirino crossed her arms as always, and lightly laughed.

“And what’s more... what’s more... cell phone novels were just me playing around in the first place... I thought I could handle it along with everything else, but in the end, I collapsed and ended up causing trouble for everyone... so you could say my eyes have been opened. I definitely can’t let something like this happen again. So actually, you could say I’m thankful that this happened.”

If only it weren't for the tear marks on her cheeks, she would have sounded pretty cool just there.

“So... back off. And get out.”

You're seriously terrible at lying, aren't you?

My little sister was certainly pretty amazing. She had the talent, the motivation, and displayed an almost disgusting level of passion for anything she started to do. It was to the point where I could even think that there was nothing she couldn't accomplish. But that doesn't mean she doesn't have a weakness.

She was extremely weak when things went very contrary to her plans. She was thoroughly prepared for anything that could happen that came within the bounds of her imagination. But when she was attacked from a blind spot, when she was facing a problem she had not prepared to deal with, she became completely lost.

I knew all too well about that weak point of hers from the problems I had faced with our father and Ayase.

And no matter what anyone says, she's still just a fourteen-year-old junior high school student.

No matter how much talent she had or how amazing she was, that's one point that I had to remember.

I'm her brother after all.

4.3 Fourth Chapter Part Three

“Ugh.....”

... Alright, what should I do...?

I had just come out of my sister's room after having heard her story, and I was deep in thought, biting my bottom lip.

Eh, I guess I shouldn't say I was deep in thought. I may have been idly asking myself what I should do in my head, but in reality I had already made up my mind long ago.

It's just that this was incredibly annoying. I just couldn't understand my reasons for making up my mind like that.

I mean, after all, I hate my little sister. I should have really hated her.

I might be repeating myself but... that was absolutely not a false statement.

From the beginning, it was because she had asked me for life advice, and wanting to end the conversation quickly, I ran my mouth off and promised careless things. Take the confusion with our father, or the commotion with Ayase... my going out of my way like that to help her was a completely irregular phenomenon. I was just taking clear responsibility for the life advice sessions I had started. So this time, not only did she say she didn't care and didn't ask me for life advice, but like the other times, this situation had absolutely nothing to do with me. In fact, I should be feeling pleased at seeing my damn cheeky sister humbled like the way she was.

"Dammit... What the hell am I doing...?"

This was not the first time I felt this hazy feeling. It was a huge problem that I had been carrying under my arm lately. First, my relationship with my sister was frozen over. Finding out my sister's secret, wanting to deal with it as quickly as possible, I took on her life advice sessions... and our relationship changed. It was continuing to change even now, this complicated feeling of emotional distance. I was slowly becoming less indifferent towards my sister's existence.

What was this? Even if I tried to peek inside my own heart, all I saw there was this swirling mess. There was nothing I could do about it.

I felt queasy, annoyed, disgusted...

Ugh, this is so damn frustrating. What should I do? I'm so confused...

Tch, what should I do here? If anybody's been in the same position, please tell me.

Why did I have to feel these unpleasant feelings because of my sister...?

Could it be that I didn't really hate her? That I really...

"Gyaah!! Definitely not!!"

As that cry came from my very core, I began to do what my sister would have probably done anyways if she weren't stuck in bed.

4.4 Fourth Chapter Part Four

Well, in any case, all that I could do was ask more reliable people for advice.

"Thank you for being so honest, Kyouzuke-shi! I don't know how much I can do, but please allow me to help you with all my strength!"

Right in front of me, Saori spoke in an exaggerated fashion. As usual, she was wearing swirly eyeglasses and a flannel shirt tucked into her pants. She was the embodiment of otaku fashion.

"... I think I've gotten the gist of what had happened... to think that her rape novel could become something like that... honestly, I can hardly believe it. But seeing how hard of a time you're having telling us this, it must be true."

Also, next to Saori sat Kuroneko, who mumbled while sipping an iced coffee.

We were at a McDonalds close to Matsudo Station⁶⁷. I had sent them a message telling them I wanted to ask them for advice about Kirino, and just that weekend, it turned out that they were both going together to the Siscali qualifiers for the national tournament, so we ended up meeting that day. The qualifiers had taken place at the Tokyo Garibah game center near here and had already finished. On Kuroneko's lap there was a bag on which was attached a huge badge that was awarded to the players who had passed the qualifiers (It was designed like one of the essential items in the game. And the words "True Little Sister" were carved into it with holographic lettering).

This Gothic Lolita girl dressed from head to toe in black was a monster when it came to games.

Now that I think about it, during the fall, the arcade version of that game had been released. I hadn't tried it yet.

No matter how I looked at it, playing something like that in front of other people would have been embarrassing. I had recently gone with Akagi to the local game center. What was up with the people who were openly playing those games, like that one where you raised up an idol, something-Master or something, or that other Academy Quiz game or whatever⁶⁸? Were they able to get over their embarrassment because they were used to it or something? I didn't really understand it at all.

By the way, the badge that was on the bag had her player-name carved in it, but...

Chiba District Representative "Matsudo Black Cat-sama"... was that a ring name or something?

"... Hmph, I see, this is why she didn't come to Winter Comiket..."

"Kyouusuke-shi. The truth is, Kuroneko-shi was really worried about Kiririn-shi. She was wondering if Kiririn-shi would be alright if the cold was dragging on this long... and she seemed pretty lonely..."

⁶⁷Close to Chiba, the place where Kirino/Kyouusuke live.

⁶⁸Well the first one is obviously Idolmaster. The second one... Quiz Magic Academy?

“Hah, don’t dramatize things like that please. It wasn’t like I was really very worried. It’s just this time my circle was accepted into Comiket, so we needed a girl to cosplay in front of our booth to help sell our books. In order to return the favors I’ve done for her before, right? But even then, she told me she had a cold and couldn’t come. I was just pitying her for her misfortune...”

“I see...”

She wanted to go to the winter event with Kirino, didn’t she...? And so, she had worked out a plan for the event... but then Kirino said she couldn’t come, so Kuroneko was probably pretty lonely.

“Sorry about that... and thank you.”

“... I have no idea why you are apologizing or thanking me.”

Kuroneko grumpily turned the other direction. For some reason, whenever I praised her or thanked her, she ended up acting like this. If you ask me, I think she was just trying to hide her embarrassment, but if Kirino had her say, she would say otherwise.

“Ah, no no. That black one doesn’t do that because she’s tsundere or something, but because of her resentment. When a rebellious gross otaku like that gets complimented by winners like me, she just finds it annoying, right? Ahh, geez, being envied by a lower being like this is pretty gross, isn’t it?” she would say.

I did not understand her theory at all, but that’s what she said. But in either case, it was a terrible thing to say.

“Being able to get through the end of the year without meeting with certain pretentious girls who think they’re winners is actually quite refreshing.”

Honestly, there was no way I could think of it other than her just being shy. After all, I was not one of those “winners” she was talking about.

Having heard Kuroneko's words, Saori also seemed to come to the same conclusion as I had.

"Hahaha, what are you saying, Kuroneko-shi? Saying things you don't mean like that. The thought of this Kuroneko-shi, who doesn't have a boyfriend, not being able to meet with Kiririn-shi and spending the end of the year so lonely like that really made my heart sting."

"... Well aren't you talking as if you know? Hmph, even though at a glance you're an unpopular girl. If you disagree, please tell us. What exactly were you doing this Christmas?"

"Me? Umm, last year's Christmas, I painted my Gabthley⁶⁹ and made an avatar for my Xbox Live profile. Hmm... the avatar really looked a lot like me, and I was really happy with it, so I uploaded a picture of it on SNS and boasted about it on Twitter."

What a sad way to spend Christmas...

"Hmm? Also, I seem to remember that the person I was talking to online then was Kuroneko-shi..."

"... I-I guess that's true..."

Kuroneko's proposed topic of discussion had completely backfired in her face. Having asked her opponent "What did you do during Christmas?" in order to make fun of her, she just got the hopeless answer "Well, I was talking with you."

The Mastudo Black Cat, or should I say Kuroneko, cutely cleared her throat to try to smooth over the conversation.

"Let's get back on topic... that terribly titled *Maisora* cell phone novel might have been stolen... but I would like to hear a bit more of the specifics."

"You're... going to help... as well?"

⁶⁹Gundam or something. Not that I care. All Gundams look alike to me.

“... You’re shocked, aren’t you? Is your head alright? I’m just curious, that’s all. Why would I do something so human as to help someone else cover up for their own mistakes? Please never make that misunderstanding again.”

In a cute little movement, Kuroneko sighed.

“... I see.”

To think that Saori and Kuroneko would gather like this and listen to my story to help Kirino out of her pinch even when the person herself wasn’t able to come... not good, I really might cry.

“... You’re really a good person, Saori... and you too.”

“... You’re the last person I want to hear that from. Don’t just interpret my words in a way that’s convenient for you, you masochistic dog.”

Kuroneko spat out that last line looking incredibly unhappy. When I had first met this girl, I really found her so unsociable... but at the root of it, that probably wasn’t the case.

“Fufu, my my.”

Having heard what I had said, Saori’s mouth curled up into her ω shape and she butted in.

“Now that I think about it, this is the first time we’ve met with Kyouusuke-shi without Kiririn-shi being here... so I want to take the opportunity to ask you something. Thinking about the first offline meeting you went to with Kiririn-shi, or last year’s summer Comiket... why do you go so out of your way to gallantly help your sister? At the very least... on the surface, it seems like a tremendous amount of trouble for you...”

That question... Kuroneko had asked me something similar before, and now Saori was continuing the tradition.

But as always, it was a tough question to answer. At any rate, it was something I continued to wonder myself, and a question I couldn't give a precise answer to even now.

As I fell into thought, Saori quickly leaned her body forward towards mine.

“... As I thought, could it be that you two are involved in an *unusual* relationship?”

“What the hell does that mean?! Definitely not!! Don't say weird things like that!”

And she said “As I thought,” didn't she?! Dammit, she had always thought that about us, hasn't she...?!

This is why erogamers are so...! Everything gets twisted into incest!

When I denied her accusations with all my strength, Saori pushed out her lower lip, and next, with a trembling expression...

“That's not it? T-Then, don't tell me... Kyousuke-shi is one of those so-called ‘masochists’...”

“That's even more wrong!”

Why did all otaku think like this?! These two are horrible!

I almost pulled out my hair, but the one who came to my defense was, surprisingly, Kuroneko.

“... It's not that unusual of a situation. Not being able to stand being so worried about your little sister and going to great lengths to protect her... that goes beyond a matter of love or hate, and is a completely different class of emotion.”

It was possible that she could say those words precisely because she had her own little

sister at home.

“... That’s what having a little sister means, right? ... That’s the one thing you can’t do anything about. Spending your own time and effort and getting comparatively nothing in return... it’s like taking care of a moody cat.”

Summing it up like that, Kuroneko cast her eyes downwards. I’m sure that she was thinking about her own sister while she was talking. She spoke with the same fluidity and gentleness as she did when she was talking about doujinshi at summer Comiket.

Saori looked like she had just immersed herself into a hot bath.

“Hm... Kuroneko-shi is a good older sister, isn’t she?”

“... It’s nothing like that. I bully her every day.”

As I watched Kuroneko sneer somewhat sadistically, I felt like I had been rescued. The hazy feeling in my chest didn’t stop, but I felt like I didn’t care about it as much.

A brother’s relationship with his sister. My relationship with Kirino. I could just take it at my own pace.

I felt convinced.

“Alright... well, let’s go!”

Bam! I hit my fist to my palm.

Saori smiled and gave me a thumbs-up, while Kuroneko expressionlessly shrugged her shoulders.

4.5 Fourth Chapter Part Five

Saori and Kuroneko. I had chosen these two to go to for advice because they knew about Kirino's hidden side very well and cared about her very much.

Kirino also had to worry about her public image, so I had to use caution in choosing who to go to for help. And in that respect, these two were also well-acquainted with the book publishing process, so they were ideal. I was honestly grateful to have them.

In reality, there were two other people who met the prerequisites I had just mentioned.

My father and Ayase. If I could add them on as allies in this matter, their help would be without equal, and they would go through hell and high water to help. But, those two... they both cared incredibly about Kirino, so if I asked them for advice they'd listen to me seriously, and would definitely offer a hand, but... As people to go to for advice, there were a few huge problems with those two.

... You understand, right? There's no way they would cooperate with me in this so easily.

First of all... because Kirino thought that father would definitely be against her activities, he still didn't even know yet about the cell phone novel. And then, Kirino overexerted herself and her condition suffered, and she collapsed with the flu. And what's worse, the club activities and modeling job he had given special permission for her to do had suffered as a result... asking father to help under these conditions was illogical, and if I ignored that point and asked him anyway, after everything was said and done I would definitely have to prepare myself for a rehash of the "Should she involve herself in otaku hobbies" discussion.

As for Ayase, I had an opportunity to talk to her just the other day... (She had called me when she heard that Kirino had collapsed from the flu. And for some reason, she gave me a huge lecture about letting things get this way even though she had told me to take care of Kirino...) And after that, she said this:

"Everyone here places great value on Kirino's work ethic, so it's honestly no big deal if she takes a bit of a break from work because she's sick... but I know Kirino, and I'm sure she's depressed about having to miss work because of something that was her fault."

And so, Ayase had talked with the office and magazines she belonged to, and had taken upon herself the modeling work that Kirino was supposed to do at the beginning of the year. She reasoned that if she did it, Kirino's sense of indebtedness would be minimized.

“That’s why, I won’t come visit Kirino.”

“I got it. If she gave you the disease, you wouldn’t be able to work in her place... how should I put it, umm...”

“Ah, please don’t thank me. I’m just doing what I want to do.”

Ayase was acting in her own way to help Kirino out of her dilemma, doing something only she could do.

We weren’t the only ones trying to interfere in this matter.

So I’ll leave that up to her, and as for this matter, we would do what we could from over here.

And so...

I refilled Saori and Kuroneko’s drinks and treated them to some fries, and once again began to talk about this cell phone novel incident.

“Uh huh, Uh huh....”

“Hmph...”

Saori and Kuroneko both sat there, listening to me quietly.

“And that’s what happened. I really want to figure out one way or another exactly what

happened here... as for me, I really think that Kumagai Ryuunosuke editor is a pretty suspicious person.”

“Hm. I understand what you’re saying, but...”

While gathering her thoughts, Saori began to give her opinion on the matter in a heavy voice.

“Would a mere company employee like that do something so risky? No matter how much faith he had that Kiririn-shi’s novel would be able to sell, once the theft became public, his own position would become pretty precarious.”

“... And also, assuming for a second that the editor was the criminal, I don’t understand what his motives would be for stealing the manuscript. He didn’t need to go out of his way to steal her work, but could have just sold it under the author’s real identity... in fact, announcing her as an ‘active model bishoujo junior high school student author debut’ and whatever would be flashy and would make the book easier to sell, and she could have face-to-face interviews, and it would be pretty easy to advertise the book in that case, right?”

That’s certainly true.

“But well... even so, it’s pretty hard to believe that this editor person had nothing to do with what happened.”

“Kyouosuke-shi, if you happen to have his business card, could you show it to me for a second?”

“Ah, here you go.”

Accepting Saori’s proposal, I took out the business card the editor had given to Kirino.

On the business card was written “MediAscii Works Second Editorial Department Mobile Division, Kumagai Ryuunosuke.”

When I placed the business card in the middle of the table, the two girls leaned forwards and began to seriously scrutinize it.

“... Hmph, this ‘Mobile Division’ is the organization that manages the Cell Phone i-Club, right?”

“To be honest, I’ve seen business cards from this company... and this looks genuine. It really doesn’t look like a forgery. Even if it were just a really good forgery, whoever made it would have had to know everything about what the real thing looked like, or else they wouldn’t be able to make something like this.”

Saori said something that resembled something Kirino had said. And Kuroneko was the next to make a comment.

“Did you check if this Kumagai actually existed in the editorial department?”

“Ah, I checked that personally after calling the reception desk so there’s no mistaking that. They thought I was making a prank call though...”

“This is just hearsay, but every year there are many, many claims made to the editorial department by people who claim that their own work was stolen. Of course, in most cases, the claims are based on empty suppositions and assumptions... but the editorial department has to continue to listen to case after case of these things... Kirino’s claim might have been treated like it was one of those claims...”

It was like the boy who cried wolf. Of course, it was easier said than done to tell them to separate the one genuine claim from the sea of false ones.

Kuroneko picked up the business card in her hand, and squinted.

“... Under the editorial department’s contact information, he wrote a cell phone number and a mailing address with a ballpoint pen, didn’t he?”

“...? Is there something bothering you about that? He’s often not in the office, so he was being thoughtful and gave her a direct way to contact him, right?”

“... How naïve are you? Please be a bit more doubtful of people’s intentions. Isn’t it possible that he wrote this separate contact information down because it would be bad if she called the editorial department directly? It’s just... oh right... taking into account what Saori had said just now... in my view, this business card itself is genuine.”

“So you mean...”

“The person Kiririn-shi met in Shinjuku was a fake who used Kumagai’s name and occupation to trick her... is that what you’re saying? Kuroneko-shi.”

“Yeah.”

Kuroneko nodded.

“... That asshole wasn’t the actual editor himself, you say?”

“That’s what I think.”

“But... this was a business card that originally came from the person himself. And also, the meeting place was in the publishing company.”

“... You’re an idiot, aren’t you? Neither of the things you said is actual solid proof that he actually worked in the publishing company. I mean, the meeting place was the *lobby* of the publishing company, right? And the place they had the real meeting was a local café, right? It’s not like the building is locked, so anybody can set up a meeting in the lobby of the publishing company’s building. And then to convince the target that he’s the real editor, he hands the target a business card he had received from the genuine editor and pretends the card is his... it’s a relatively popular method for committing fraud.”

“... Fraud?”

“... Yes, pretending to be an editor and approaching an author candidate, saying ‘Do you want your book to be published?’ and makes the author put a preliminary payment down and

then disappears... those kinds of 'self-paid publishing scams' exist... doesn't this situation seem rather similar?"

"But Kirino never had any money taken from her."

"That's true. What was taken was just the manuscript and a different person's name was put onto that manuscript, but it was then published through legal means from a real publishing company. The method is similar, but this was different from these 'self-paid publishing scams.' And I think the differences between these two scams are key."

Saori continued in a careful manner.

"That person who was pretending to be Kumagai-shi was probably connected to the publishing company in some way. If not, there's no reason he would have been able to get the manuscript he received published, and there would be no reason he would have had Kumagai-shi's business card."

Saori took out her cell phone, and handed it over so everyone could see the screen.

On that screen was the homepage for the *Maisora* novel.

"This is just a hunch, but this 'Rino' person is probably the person who stole Kiririn-shi's manuscript. I don't know what position he's in, but for now, it's wise to assume that he has a lot of influence at the publishing company. First, at the start, Kiririn-shi's novel was well-received at the cell phone novel submission site, and having honed in on that, Rino-shi used the real Kumagai-shi's business card and approached Kiririn-shi, pretending to be an editor. Having received the manuscript from Kiririn-shi, Rino-shi brought it in to the editorial department as something he had written himself, and successfully carried the book to publication... how does that chain of events sound?"

"... For me, what I can't understand is why that... criminal, was it? Why that criminal set his sights onto that rape novel is a mystery to me. How did he read that thing and reach the conclusion that it could sell...?"

Kuroneko shook her head back and forth a number of times.

“It’s because her cell phone novel reached first place on the monthly rankings, and in one month since submission had been viewed three hundred fifty thousand times. Even untrained eyes could see that Kirino would be able to write popular cell phone novels after this, right?”

“... That’s what I’m saying I don’t understand. The kind of people who would read that garbage and would like it seem to me to have to be inhabitants of hell.”

That’s going a bit too far, isn’t it?

It wasn’t just Kuroneko’s sense of rivalry with and jealousy of Kirino, but it also seemed that Kuroneko had a bad opinion of cell phone novels in general. She picked up the cell phone that had been placed in the middle of the table, and after putting the *Maisora* prologue on display (it was the scene where Tetsu gets made into minced meat after getting hit by a dump truck. As always, the text was filled with line breaks), she calmly scrutinized the screen.

“... Hmph, just look at this giant pile of shit that starts right from page one. There’s no way a dump truck would hit a person and then the sound effect would be ‘bakawwn!’⁷⁰ Ugh... I just have to glance at this and I can already see the author’s smug smirk in my head, and I start to want to crush this cell phone.”

“K-Kuroneko-shi?! That’s my cell phone!”

Kuroneko grasped the cell phone tightly, causing Saori to cry out.

Kuroneko clicked her tongue, and returned the cell phone to the table.

“... So, there are people who would actually unabashedly make this crappy piece of writing into a book and sell it? The editors and the readers... they all don’t have any aesthetic sense at all, do they?”

... Why was she so hostile towards editors?

⁷⁰Mmmm... bacon.

Did she have a past history with them?

With a “come on, come on,” Saori tried to calm things down.

“At any rate, this Rino-shi is someone who really has an eye for things that could sell, and has an ability to deal with writers that would put real editors to shame. After all, he met with Kiririn-shi in real life, gave her advice, and got her to agree with him easily. And then he got her work published... this is just the opinion of a novice... but from the outline of Maisora I can feel that it’s going to be a huge hit.”

“I guess. After the meeting was over, Kirino also seemed to have a lot of faith in him. She was really fired up about it, but it wasn’t until they met in person that she believed everything he told her.”

“... Hah, honestly, I want to say that it serves her right. I thought something like this would happen... do you want to know how much she bragged to me about this last month?”

... That’s no surprise there. There’s no way Kirino wouldn’t go and brag to Kuroneko about this...

Saori, seemingly deeply interested, asked a question.

“Yahaha, now that I think about it, you two have been battling back and forth on SNS too. What do you use for direct confrontations? Instant messenger or something?”

““Kyahaha - that’s why you’ll never be more than a wannabe! You should learn as much from me as possible! Ahh, but you can’t, can you? You don’t have enough skill!’ That went on all night long over Skype... I definitely will not forget how much I resented her that night.”

“... Ah, that’s... sorry about that.”

Being stared at by those red eyes filled with malice, I could do nothing but be apologetic.

And even though she went through that, she still came here and is helping me help Kirino...

she really is a softhearted person.

And like that, even though we were just making educated guesses, we slowly began to form a solid picture of what had happened.

But even then, it was very unclear what we should do from here.

“I feel like I can see exactly what had happened, but... what can we do now? It’s probably best to get them to realize that this cell phone novel was actually written by Kirino, but...”

“... That’s definitely rather difficult, right?”

“Yeah, we don’t have any proof.”

“What about the original manuscript data...”

“The site on which that was originally saved was hijacked by the other side. The minute she told him her password, the password was changed, and she couldn’t get into her own site anymore or something.”

So, there was no longer any evidence that Kirino had been the original author of the novel.

Not seeming to want to admit defeat, Kuroneko spoke.

“Is the manuscript data still on her computer? As a backup or something...”

“Kuroneko-shi, even if Kiririn-shi had left a copy on her computer as a backup, I don’t think the situation would change much. The full text has already been made public on the internet. So even if we tell them that this is the original manuscript data, if they tell us that we had copied the text from the publicly available text online, we wouldn’t really have a way to argue against that.”

“... Hmph. Maybe he posted the text up as ‘advertisement’ but really intended it as

insurance... he might have thought pretty far ahead as well.”

He was one step ahead of us. If our reasoning was correct, then we were dealing with quite a sly opponent.

Silence fell for a while. Myself included, we picked at the fries that had gotten cold and sipped our drinks, each gathering our own thoughts about the matter.

The first one who put these thoughts into words was Saori.

“In the end, I think the only way to go about this is to explain the situation to the editorial department and get them to accept that Kiririn-shi was the author. Of course, as Kyoussuke-shi was kind enough to mention, if we try to explain this to them over the phone, they’ll think we’re making the same type of empty claim they get all day and won’t take us seriously. So to avoid that, we’ll need to directly contact the people involved with the publication of *Maisora*.”

“... Hmph, thanks for stating the obvious. So? How are normal junior high school students like us going to get in touch with people in the editorial department?”⁷¹

“... For now, I guess there are a few people I could talk to...”

“R-Really?”

I was surprised. Now that I think about it though, Saori did say something about having seen this company’s business cards before... My natural human curiosity was piqued, and I began to ask about who exactly she was going to call, but... when I saw the look on Saori’s face, I stopped myself.

Saori seemed a bit troubled and lightly scratched her cheek. It seemed like there was something that was hard for her to say.

⁷¹Maybe a bit of social commentary is in order here. Japanese companies are much more stratified and hierarchical than Western ones - it is much harder to get noticed there if you want to be a writer or something, so Kuroneko’s point here is very appropriate for Japan, even if it might seem a bit strange coming from a Western standpoint.

“... Yeah. But, don’t count on us getting too much help from my connections... I can’t just go up to them and tell them that *Maisora* was plagiarized and that they should do something about it. Unfortunately, the best I could probably do is to get us an appointment with someone from the publishing company under some pretext. Kumagai-shi belongs to the Second Editorial Department Mobile Division... but it would be difficult for me to get an appointment there directly... I mean, I don’t actually know anybody who works in the editorial department...”

“No, that’s plenty. Thanks, Saori. You’re honestly, honestly a reliable person.”

I extended my thanks from the bottom of my heart. I know it’s pretty late to be saying something like that, but I felt bad about imposing on her so much. And they seemed like connections she didn’t really want to use either...

As I deeply lowered my head, Saori stuck both her hands in front of her to get me to stop. “Haha... please stop that, you’re going to make me blush.”

Saori embarrassingly rubbed the back of her head, and suddenly, spoke in a serious voice I had never heard come out of her.

“... If you say it like that, then acting like Saori Bajeena has had its effect.”

“... Huh?”

“Hahaha, nothing, I’m just talking to myself.”

That’s what it seemed like, so I let it go.

“Well. Assuming that I can get them to agree to meet with us, it’s then just a matter of what we do from there.”

“... I have some ideas in regards to that. Well, just leave it to me please... kukuku, if everything goes as planned, we’ll have good enough reason to not only go to the editorial

department once, but twice or three times...”

Hearing her words sent a chill down my spine. Because Kuroneko’s ominous chuckle resembled the one my sister had that time she had handed me a box full of eroges.

4.6 Fourth Chapter Part Six

It was evening two days later. Together with Kuroneko this time, I once again headed for the publishing company in Shinjuku.

Saori didn’t come. The reason seemed to be related with how she set up an appointment with the publishers for us through her connections, but it seemed to be a difficult topic so I didn’t press the issue.

And I didn’t need to hear it.

“... So we should just head straight up to the second editorial department on the fourth floor...”

No response, as expected from Kuroneko.

... Well, how do I put it... she was fundamentally the type of person who didn’t talk much. By the way, the last time I came here, Kirino had dressed up in a formal suit because she was meeting with the editors, but this time Kuroneko was dressed like usual, head to toe in her black Gothic Lolita fashion.

... Does she not have anything else to wear? That wasn’t a question I should ask a girl even if I were wrong, so I didn’t say anything, and she could have very well been wearing a different outfit with a similar design...

She kind of acts like some erogé character, doesn’t she? Those characters always wear the same clothes too...

As those stupid thoughts were running to my head, I proceeded through the lobby and entered the elevator, going up to the fourth floor.

Coming out of the elevator, I saw paths going to the left and right, with a telephone placed right in front of me.

It seemed that this phone was connected to an inner line that visitors were supposed to use to call the editorial department.

I used the phone while looking at the list that was on the same table as the phone.

“Hello, this is the Dengeki Books Editorial Department.”

“Ah, umm... this is Kousaka... I have an appointment at five.”

“Understood. Please wait a little while.”

“Ah, sorry, I also wanted to ask if this is the second editorial department?”

“Yes, it is indeed. This is the Media Ascii Works Second Editorial Department, Dengeki Books Editorial Division.”

So, that means that in the Mobile Division here, there was an editor named Kumagai Ryuunosuke.

Which means we managed to make it to the same department that person was in.

When I put the phone back, before long, a door opened on the left and a bespectacled man appeared. It seemed that he had come to meet us. Following behind him, we walked through a magnificent passageway you would expect to find in a hotel.⁷² Going through the innermost door that the man had come out of, we entered a ridiculously wide office space.

⁷²Kyousuke, never stay in a hotel in America.

“Sorry for intruding...”

... So this was an editorial department? I was curious, so I let my gaze wander around without restraint. To be quite honest, the place was pretty jumbled. They were meticulous in their cleaning, so all the furnishings were spotless, but it was pretty cluttered. Over there were a large number of cardboard boxes, along with a bunch of bishoujo character posters and dolls for decoration. It honestly was an office that reeked of otaku. To be pretty old and have to work in a place like this... you could call it a job, but editors certainly had it rough.

“Please come in and wait in one of these booths.”

“Thank you thank you...”

On the left hand side after entering the office there was a corner that had been partitioned off, and in that section were desks that could seat four people. So this was the place they would have business meetings about publishing books...?

As advised by the person who had led us in, we picked the closest booth out of the three that were there and sat down.

I took off my jacket, put down my bag, and drank a mouthful of the tea they had prepared for us.

“Pheh...”

Finally, a single breath.

“Ahh, I’m pretty nervous... this is what job interviews must feel like.”

I struck up some small talk with the girl next to me, but...

“.....”

Kuroneko looked as pale as a vampire⁷³ and both her eyes were opened wide. Cold sweat ran profusely down her forehead.

“... H-Hey, Kuroneko. Calm down. Are you alright?”

“... There’s no problem.”

There so is a problem. She looks like death.

Even though she was the one who suggested this tactic...

“..... Well, I guess it’s natural that you’re more nervous than I am. Sorry about all this...”

“... I said there wasn’t a problem, didn’t I? Please do not apologize to me.”

Kuroneko closed her eyes halfway, and took one sip of her tea.

“Also, this meeting is being held only under the pretext of us wanting to meet with an editor, so there’s not a single reason to be nervous.”

Kuroneko mumbled while maintaining an expressionless mask, but I felt she was just putting on an act.

Yes, to make it perfectly clear, today we had come to submit an application.

By application, what I mean is, for example, someone takes them a manga or novel he or she wrote and makes an appeal to try to get them to sell it. The editor reads the work and judges whether it can be used or not, and should the situation permit, gives the applicant advice on how to get the work published, or introduces him or her to another editorial

⁷³He references a “jiang shi,” which is a Chinese brand of vampire.

department. Of course, if the work can't be used, the applicant might get verbally abused, driven away, laughed at... that kind of thing.

Even though she had never submitted an application like that, Kuroneko had told me all that.

The office was quieter than I had expected (I had imagined an office in which a frightening editor-in-chief was ranting and raving at his subordinates, in which editors desperately called authors and urged them to turn in their manuscripts... that kind of thing). But, occasionally I could hear what sounded like editors having business meetings with authors over the phone.

And the Mobile Division or whatever was somewhere around here...

Even though Saori had connections, we wouldn't have been able to get in here without at least making up a reason. So, we told them that we were submitting an application to get a work published and successfully infiltrated the office.

In a word, we were on a scouting mission. Let me explain it simply one more time.

We had passed into the "Second Editorial Department, Dengeki Books Editorial Division."

The place "Kumagai Ryuunosuke" worked was the "Second Editorial Department, Mobile Division."

These two were different divisions that belonged to the same editorial department, and the one we were interested in was the latter.

The genre of the work that Kuroneko created seemed to mesh relatively well with Dengeki Books, so under that pretext, Saori had been able to get us to the Dengeki Books Editorial Division. If possible, I wanted to ask the editor we were going to meet to allow us to have a meeting with Kumagai Ryuunosuke, but...

This wasn't a trick we could keep on doing, so I was all the more nervous.

“By the way, you don’t seem to have anything here, so what are you making your application with?”

“... I already mailed it in. My application this time was for a novel, so it wouldn’t make sense to bring it in and expect him to read it in the same day, right?”

Ahh, I see. That’s certainly true.

“So, which work did you send them...?”

“... Earlier, I had brought a black, bound doujinshi to your house, right? That.”

“..... T-That one....?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Well...”

That one... she was going to make a professional editor read that novel that Kirino had spent so much time bashing...?

W-Will this really be alright...? And that... wasn’t the only thing I was worried about...

“... Let me just say it. You’re dealing with someone who’s meeting with you as part of work. So don’t treat this as if you’re casually talking with a friend or something, alright?”

Because your mouth is every bit as nasty as Kirino’s.

“... Tch..... you don’t have to tell me that. I already know.”

Kuroneko gently covered her face with one hand, and then suddenly flicked her arm to the side.

When she did that... her red eyes had turned black.

“... Camouflage complete... is this character and tone of voice more acceptable?”

What was up with her attitude, as if she was trying to say *“I have assumed a character that is more appropriate for human negotiations”*?

All she did was take out her color contacts very quickly, right? Pretty handy trick there.

“Do you really understand...?”

But there was no time to confirm that. A new person had entered the booth.

It was a guy who had a white towel wrapped around his head in the style of a pirate bandana. He wore a warm-looking fleece hooded sweatshirt, and rather than seeming like a company employee, he looked like someone who would be working stage crew during a show.

“Ahh, I’m really sorry! The editor who’s handling your case still hasn’t come in today! I really do apologize, but would you mind waiting another fifteen minutes or so?”

“... Ah... I don’t mind.”

“Ah, really? I’m honestly terribly sorry! Feel free to leaf through a few of the magazines over there while you’re waiting!”

From the time he came in, all he did was apologize. He seemed like an incredibly humble person.

And then, even though he told us to read some of the magazines, he went and comfortably sat himself across from us.

“But nice to meet you, my name is Henkutsu. I’m just a lowly editor here.”

“Ahh... Henkutsu-san...?”

“Haha, it’s a strange name, isn’t it? Our editorial department gives each and every one of its editors pet names... nicknames, I should say. It’s become customary that we call each other by those names.”

It was like a custom straight out of a secret evil organization in a superhero series. Alright, remind me to never apply here for a job.

“By the way, you two sure have some strange connections. Our department generally doesn’t deal with applications made by amateurs. We only handle applications just occasionally from semi-pros or pros. And the work you sent to us was a doujinshi derivative of a preexisting series, so this situation is honestly quite unprecedented.”

“Ahh.”

For a while now, all I’ve been saying is “Ahh.” Wait, so this guy also read the doujinshi?

“Well, that company does help us out a great deal with our related goods. Like, for instance, those things over there are good examples.”

Henkutsu-san vaguely gestured with one hand to the “things over there.”

Even if you say that... it’s not like I know which things you’re talking about. For Henkutsu-san, he was probably speaking under the assumption that we were well informed about “that company” or whatever, and so it was unavoidable that he would be difficult to understand.

Anyhow, I never asked him about “that company.” Why, you ask? Because Saori didn’t seem to want to talk much about the connections she had.

Kuroneko didn’t ask anything either. Or rather, she hadn’t said a single word since Henkutsu-san had shown up.

“So, after that we decided that we would just read your work and meet with you and see how things went.”

Well, he was a pretty blunt person, wasn't he?

“This is just my personal opinion, but I thought it was pretty interesting. What you sent us was a so-called “time travel” Maschera doujinshi, right? I personally am a fan of Maschera, and I'm relatively knowledgeable about plot elements in derivative novels like “time travel” and “alternate universe,” so I can't deny that I may be somewhat biased in my opinion here. There were certainly a lot of words you made up, and places that were difficult to understand. I had read your setup notes so I didn't have a hard time at all, but it would be good for you to remember that there will be many people who don't feel the same way.”

“Ahh..”

Hey, pretty good, Kuroneko. He certainly added on a lot of annoying things at the end there, but a professional editor thought your book was interesting.

When I glanced at Kuroneko, she had a bit of a blush on her cheeks while still retaining her emotionless mask. She probably wasn't completely dissatisfied with his comments. Of course, our visit today was primarily concerned with contacting the people involved with *Maisora*, Kumagai Ryuunosuke in particular, and Kuroneko's application was to the very end just the pretext under which we came.

But if Kuroneko could also get her work assessed like this, that was a good thing too.

“Ah, also, they never told me what kind of people would be coming, and I'm surprised at how young you two are. And what's more, I didn't expect two people to show up.”

“Ahh.”

“Umm, did you both have a hand in the project? The doujinshi you sent us had a manga and a novel portion. So perhaps one of you was in charge of the original story?”

“No, that’s-”

I’m just accompanying her... is what I wanted to say, but Kuroneko cut me off.

“Yes. We’re brother and sister and wrote it together.”

“Wha-...?! Hey, you-”

In my surprise, I began to protest, but Kuroneko slapped a hand over my mouth.

Her expressionless face and black eyes stared right up at me.

“Isn’t that right... oniisan?”

“.....?!?!”

When had we decided on this setup?! Nobody told me anything!!

I sent Kuroneko a resentful look, but we couldn’t take back what was already said.

Whatever may happen, we had to stick to this story. I turned my gaze back front.

“Yes. We wrote it together.”

“So, who did what?”

Even if you ask that... honestly, Kuroneko was the one who wrote the entire thing, so how exactly should I answer?

I scratched my head and hesitated, but Kuroneko nonchalantly answered.

“Niisan thought of the setup. For example, the special move names and such...”

“So for example, this ‘Divine Demonic Destructive Thrust’?”

“Yes. He said he had put his all into that name.”

I definitely did not! That’s just your own opinion about it, isn’t it?!

Kuroneko vaguely glanced in my direction.

“In truth, the manga and novel were written by me, but the setup notes niisan made were very important to the work. So, I can say that we both wrote it.”

Dammit! What’s with that haughty facial expression, as if she’s bestowing some great honor on me...?! Thanks but no thanks!

Also, wait... so I’m the person she claims wrote that thick set of notes? I hadn’t read the notes at all, but didn’t Kirino trash that thing, saying that it was embarrassing and jokingly comparing it to something like a book of sorcery?

I don’t know about this...

“Ah... I’m not too sure about that ‘Divine Demonic Destructive Thrust’ line...”

See?! The editor looks completely bewildered!

Having been softly criticized, Kuroneko seemed displeased and scowled. But she still tried to smooth things over with her next question.

“... Well, Henkutsu-san, what name would you give to this special move?”

“Ahh, hmm...”

Henkutsu-san crossed his arms and thought about it for a few seconds.

“How about ‘Pure Magic Destructive Killing Wave’?”

... That didn’t seem to be all that different of a name.

No, I apologize. I’m just a novice at this, so I might not really know what I’m talking about...

Afterwards, Kuroneko and the editor talked for a bit about the naming (even though all the names they came up with honestly sounded the same to me). The discussion didn’t seem to be going anywhere (that was just my personal opinion though), so I wanted to suggest that we start looking into the *Maisora* issue before the other editor showed up, but Kuroneko seemed to have really gotten into her conversation with Henkutsu-san, so I couldn’t get a word in edgewise and I couldn’t really look around without her.

And then, the conversation stopped for a moment, so I took the opportunity to forcibly steer the conversation back onto something more productive.

“Umm, so what kind of person is the editor that will be meeting with us today?”

“Eh? A-Ahh... in this department we call him ‘Puurin.’”

“Sounds like a pretty cute name.”

It was probably a female editor, then. An image of a plump office lady⁷⁴ (with huge breasts) came to mind.

⁷⁴An office lady is a term referring to a rather low-level female employee in a Japanese company.

“That’s what it seems like, right? Hahaha, but that’s completely off the mark. Once you see the real thing, you’ll be really surprised.”

“Ahh.”

“... How will we be surprised?”

Kuroneko cocked her head to the side.

“Fufu, well...”

Henkutsu-san put up a finger and looked as if he was about to launch into a ghost story, and suddenly began to speak in a low voice.

At the same time, someone appeared behind him.

“He looks just like Akuma from Street Fighter.”⁷⁵

“... Sorry for being late. I’m Puurin. Nice to meet you.”

He introduced himself with a deep voice. What incredible timing that was.

Having realized that his comment was overheard, Henkutsu half jumped with an “Uwaahhh!” and looked over his shoulder, quickly lowering his head.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t think you would be behind me like that!”

“... No, it’s fine, people always say that about me.”

He was an elderly man. His white hair was arranged in waves on top of his head, looking

⁷⁵He used the Japanese name for the character, or Gouki.

almost like flames.

Just like Henkutsu-san had said, he looked quite like the hidden character from the Capcom one-on-one fighter. It was a famous character even I knew.

He had deep-set eyes, his face was solemnly wrinkled, and his skin was dark. But unlike Akuma, he was incredibly thin. He was almost sickly thin, but his eyes were sharp, so he gave off quite a horrifying impression.

My father also looked pretty terrifying, but this person... and this might be really rude of me to say... but this person exuded an inhumanly sinister atmosphere from his entire body.

To be frank, I could feel waves of killing intent coming off him.

And even then, his name was Puurin. Puurin... what the hell? Who exactly would have attached that cute of a name to this person? It couldn't be that he thought of it himself, right?

“... Hello, I'm Kousaka. Nice to meet you.”

“... Nice to meet you.”

Both Kuroneko and I were a bit taken aback by this warlock with such a cute name, but for now at least we safely completed our opening greetings.

And then Puurin-san responded with a heavy voice that surely emanated from the depths of hell. “... Yes,” he nodded.

Henkutsu-san stood up, switching positions with Puurin-san.

“Well, I'll just return to work then... good luck!”

With that final word of encouragement, Henkutsu-san hastily ran away.

Eh? Seriously? That just leaves us alone with... w-we're supposed to just talk with Puurin-san? Wait just a second! Don't just abandon us here! Why does it feel like we've been left on a sacrificial altar?!

"... Something wrong? *stare*"

"N-Nothing! *shock*"

The minute our eyes met, I looked away. Uwah, this isn't good, is it? We were supposed to get information about *Maisora* and Kumagai Ryuunosuke out of this clearly reticent, difficult-seeming person?

No way~~~! We're done for! If I knew this was going to happen, I would have much rather have brought up the issue at hand while the good-natured Henkutsu-san was still here. Crap, what should we do...?

When I looked to the side in bewilderment, this time I met with Kuroneko's gaze. Probably for the same reason as I had, Kuroneko was also looking to the side. It seemed that even Kuroneko had a hard time meeting Puurin-san's gaze straight on.

"... We have to do what we came here to do."

Kuroneko mumbled, almost as if she was talking to herself. She then resolved herself, faced front, and nervously broke the ice.

"... Umm, did you happen to read the doujinshi I sent you the other day?"

"... I read it. As well as the setting notes."

Puurin-san's words were clear and concise. Kuroneko's manner of speaking was quite gloomy, so listening to these two talk didn't give me a cheerful feeling. I could almost see a black aura rising from the booth. In this case, two negatives did not make a positive.

“Here are copies of the manuscript and the setting notes.”

Puurin-san stacked up bundles of A4-size papers onto the desk. There were three stacks of the thick papers, each held together by a separate clip.

... There was a stack for me too? ... But I really never read any of this.

I looked down at the bundle of papers that was passed to me, and felt just a bit awkward. It's a bit late to be saying this, but I really should have read this before coming.

Puurin-san began to read the memo that was on top of his desk. It was something Henkutsu-san had written and left behind.

“Brother and sister wrote it together... The main writer is the little sister, and her pen-name is ‘Kuroneko.’ ... Is that correct?”

“... Yes.”

“Kuroneko-san, are you aiming to become a novelist? The doujinshi I received also had a manga portion though...”

From the start, Puurin-san barely looked at me, and focused his attention on Kuroneko.

To a pro, it may have been obvious that I was just an extra here at this meeting.

“... I...”

Kuroneko grasped the hem of her skirt tightly and hung her head.

Even though she spoke a bit clumsily, she spoke from the heart.

“... I like writing stories and drawing. So much so, that if possible, I want to be able to do both as a job... but, today I’m making an application for a novel.”

“I understand. So, would it be correct to say that right now, you are aiming to debut your work with our firm?”

“Yes.”

“I see... well, allow me to speak with that in mind then.”

His tone was completely indifferent as he continued talking. It almost felt like a medical interview.

“What amateur novelist competitions have you applied to?”

“I apply for your company’s competition every year.”

“How many years have you applied? Have you applied for any other competitions?”

“I’ve applied for three years. Other than your company, I’ve also applied for the MF and SD competitions every year, but I’ve never made it to the final round.”

“... I see. That’s quite impressive for someone so young.”

“... Ah, thank you very much.”

..... This is uncomfortable.

What was with this heavy, gloomy atmosphere? Henkutsu-san, come back, I’m begging you.

Feeling intolerably restless, I glanced around. The other booths were separated by a partition, the wall being made of cabinets and cardboard boxes, so I couldn't get a glimpse at what was happening in the office.

The area we were in was in the dead center of the office, but felt more like a private room.

Perhaps because our opponent looked so scary this time, I felt as if I was locked up in an interrogation room.

"It's quite unusual for someone so young to apply every year like that. Do you have any special motive for applying?"

"... It's like I said before, that I really want to write stories... but honestly speaking, I also want to earn money. Income from book royalties would be much higher than what I'm earning at my part-time job right now, so if I could make a good debut, I could make a good amount of money for my family."

This was the first time I had heard about Kuroneko's motivations. I remember she had told me at summer Comiket that she secretly had a part-time job⁷⁶, but... their family might not be very well off. Going to school, having a part-time job, trying hard at her hobbies... whether Kirino or Kuroneko, I found myself surrounded by exceptional younger people. As the older person, I really should learn from them.

"... Do you think that reason is selfish?"

Kuroneko asked in a bit of a worried voice, and Puurin-san frowned in silence for a while before finally speaking.

"No."

And that's all he said. It really appeared to me that Puurin-san had seemed to be angry at something ever since he came into the booth.

⁷⁶Remember that in Japan, it is often school policy that students are not allowed to simultaneously hold part-time jobs.

Was it because Henkutsu-san had said he looked like Akuma? Ugh, he really had gone too far.

The talk continued in this stifling, heavy atmosphere... and at last we arrived at the main issue of Kuroneko's application.

"So... about the manuscript I read..."

Thump thump. I felt like I could hear the sound of Kuroneko's heart beating out her chest.

"We won't be able to use it for a publication."

Puurin-san denied Kuroneko candidly, with a tone of finality.

"This goes without saying, but you haven't been able to get through the rookie competition, so there's no reason we would be able to publish your work. The reason I'm speaking with you here in the first place is because I am fulfilling an obligation to someone who we are indebted towards. This may sound harsh, but just because you're well connected doesn't mean we can treat you any differently. If we did, then that would be doing a disservice towards the people who apply for our firm's rookie award."

"... I understand. I apologize for taking up so much of your time."

Kuroneko apologized timidly. Hearing her words, I felt a sick sensation in my gut.

I mean, the reason Kuroneko was here was at my request, for the sake of Kirino.

I understand where Puurin-san was coming from for being a bit hostile thinking that Kuroneko had forced this appointment because of her connections, but that blame should have been placed on my shoulders. But I couldn't say that here.

Because then, all Kuroneko's efforts might just go to waste.

“This is the last time we will meet with you because of your connections. Next time, please send your manuscript directly into the competition. Like everyone else... now, about what you have written...”

“..... Yes...”

“... There were certainly some interesting points in the character dialogues. I especially thought this Kirino original character was good... After I read it, I really was turned on by this Kirino-tan⁷⁷... she was very moe moe, yes.”

This damn old man. What the hell are you calling moe moe at an age like yours? What exactly are you saying looking like that and sounding like that... although, I understood that it was his job. That character was modeled off my little sister, you know. Dammit, and just when I thought I had forgotten... wasn't there a scene in which that character became a sex slave? Kuroneko, dammit, don't use that for your application, you asshole.

“... I... don't really like that character though...”

“... I see. That's quite unfortunate. On the contrary, I found all the characters other than Kirino-tan quite terrible. I also think you tried to jam too many elements into the setup. Working out a setup is definitely not a bad thing, but you don't seem to have gotten the hang of it. The organization was a mess and the descriptions were way too dense, and it comes off as a prototypical wannabe novel in a bad way... I'm doubtful a manuscript on this level could even get through the preliminaries. Even bearing in mind that this work is based off something else, the craftsmanship is just awful. It is not even close to something we could sell on the market.”

As the severe criticisms rolled in one after the other, Kuroneko paled even further than she usually was.

At first, she countered each of his points, with a “But, if I change that...” or with a “That's not right...” or with a “... The ‘dark force’ is a very important element of my original world...” but she was shot down each time with his relentless logic, with a “The only person who feels that way is you, and to the readers it isn't important at all. It's just something that makes everything difficult to read,” or a “using your writing as a method of self-expression is

⁷⁷Literally, “I was panting heavily” ... well, there goes the very last miniscule shred of innocence I had left.

perfectly fine, but aren't there things you should worry about before getting to that point?" ... so her will to resist slowly vanished.

"... And those are my general comments on the work. Next I'll go into the finer details... if I may, I will start in order from page one, so please follow along in the copies you have."

This time, Puurin-san flipped through the doujinshi page by page, droning on and on about each and every little thing he found wrong with the book. The copy of the manuscript he was referencing had been marked completely red by a pen on each and every page.

D-Don't tell me that all that writing was there to mark out the "bad parts" of Kuroneko's novel... and if so, he was planning on going through each and every comment...?

The fault-finding session continued for what seemed like an eternity. We were dealing with a seasoned professional here, so Kuroneko and I had no choice but to sit through this one-sided consultation.

... Ten minutes had passed, and then twenty.

... And then an hour... and then three hours... and finally...

Staring fixedly at the ground and listening to the harsh criticism, Kuroneko's expression, for the first time since I've met her, warped in frustration.

"..... *sob*..... *hng*h....."

"Don't make my little sister cry, you asshole! Isn't there a better way you can say things?! No matter how you look at it, what you're doing now is just too cruel, isn't it?! You're talking to a junior high school girl, you know!!"

The minute I heard Kuroneko crying, I felt myself bursting with anger. I had yelled out

half-unconsciously.

I also stood up forcefully, and slammed a fist down vigorously onto the table.

“.....”

But Puurin-san didn't seem the least perturbed by my yelling. Wordlessly, he began to wipe up the tea that had been spilled on the table by the force of my fist.

Seeing him do that, I suddenly came back to my senses. I had shouted quite loudly, so the people outside were probably curious about what had happened. I heard people chattering all around me, and the people having business meetings in neighboring booths were discreetly peeping in to see what was going on.

I felt absolutely horrible. When the thought occurred that I might have made Kuroneko feel the same way, I really just wanted to vanish.

“.....”

Ahhh crap, seriously... I had acted just like a child there, hadn't I? That's embarrassing.⁷⁸ What rude things did I just say to the person who had so kindly taken time out of his work schedule to meet with us? He could have probably put what he was saying differently, but it's not like I could tell him to not criticize things he thought were bad. It wouldn't be good advice if he were being lenient. I wasn't talking to a schoolteacher or my father here. I was talking to this man about business on equal footing, and he was telling us how to do things. He was being serious and sincere, and it was natural that we sit here and just listen.

... But how was I supposed to just bear with all that?!

To be told with a single stroke that something you had lovingly crafted was not something they could use... even though I knew he had a point, it was just way too cruel.

⁷⁸It might do the reader well to remember here that Japan is a much more reserved, polite country than most countries in the West. Kyousuke's outburst is much more out of line there than it would be in America, for example.

And this girl was the same as Kirino. She had worked out this thick set of setup notes, thinking about what characters would say what kinds of things, and I was certain that she had put her all into it.

To think that-

“Niisan.”

Still seething with resentment, I heard Kuroneko’s kind voice admonishing me from the side. It was the same gentle tone she used when talking about her own little sister. As I stood there, she pinched my sleeve and tugged.

It seemed she wanted me to sit back down.

Briskly rubbing the tears off her face with her sleeve, she looked up at me with wet eyes.

“... It’s fine... thanks for getting angry for me.”

“... I-I see...”

I was captivated by her teary face... o-oh right, I forgot that she’s also pretty attractive. It’s not something I’m aware of normally, so it had slipped my mind. Her half-crying expression was incredibly charming, so I couldn’t help but think weird thoughts despite the situation we were in... but to think seeing a girl’s crying face would get my heart beating so fast... it was probably a problem with my personality. And she was a junior high school student for Christ’s sake.

“... I apologize. When it comes to his sister, sometimes niisan’s head goes funny.”

“Umm... I also apologize. Yelling out so suddenly like that...”

H-Hey. My head didn’t go funny at all though... even as I thought that, I followed Kuroneko’s lead and lowered my head.

“... It’s fine, I don’t mind.”

Fortunately, Puurin-san seemed to forgive us. Rather, he seemed completely composed.

“Shall we take a short break?”

... Puurin-san stood up from his seat, and spoke with a voice that didn’t reveal an ounce of what he was feeling. He held a wet handkerchief in one hand, so he might be going to deal with that.

“..... Um, I’m sorry.”

Sounding more down than I had ever heard her, Kuroneko muttered. This was also the first time I had seen her act so sincerely.

“... Because of me, it’s become very difficult for us to get any information regarding Kumagai Ryuunosuke...”

“No, I’m sorry too... it was my request that led to things getting like this... I apologize.”

We exchanged apologies. We used words from the heart that would not have come out if it had not been for a situation like this.

I felt strange. We had very seldom talked to each other in the past, but we had come to a strange sense of mutual understanding. What exactly was this weird feeling of camaraderie?

This awkward, unpleasant silence continued for a while.

Finally, Puurin-san came back. For some reason, he was holding a tray.

“Please.”

Concisely speaking just that one word, Puurin-san placed some new cups of tea and pudding on the desk.

“Please eat.”

“... Ah.”

What was up with him...? What exactly does he want to do...? Is he... not angry with us?

While we sat there completely puzzled, Puurin-san calmly sat down in front of us. With his usual warlock-like expression, he spooned up a bite of pudding and sent it into his mouth. *Bite, chew chew, gulp.*

... He nodded, seemingly content.

“The pudding is good. It’ll cheer you up.”

..... Huh? I turned and met Kuroneko’s gaze. Could it be, that this person was...

“... Are you trying to cheer us up?”

“... Chatting really isn’t one of my strong suits... sorry.”

Griinnnnnn. A rather repulsive looking light smile appeared on Puurin-san’s face. It was a look that could make children swoon... but I’ll just interpret his actions as trying to cheer us up.

Yes... this person’s criticisms were incredibly harsh, and he also looked absurdly scary, but he wasn’t such a bad guy. He really wasn’t a bad person...

“Haha... could it be... you like pudding, so they call you Puurin-san?”

“... Yeah... well, it’s because pudding looks like breasts to me.”

...Well, he’s just a hentai old man.

Puurin-san tapped on the plate with the pudding on it with a finger, and watched the pudding wobble back and forth, seeming fully satisfied.

“... Don’t you feel at ease when you do this? Our company president has a policy, he recommends that you eat your pudding while tapping on the plate five times every ten seconds.”

If this wasn’t some ploy to get us to relax, this company was seriously deranged.

(Whisper) “... N-Niisan... he’s completely nuts...”

(Whisper) “... Shh, don’t let him hear you...”

Kuroneko and I whispered to each other as we watched this almost cult-like hentai ceremony happening in front of our eyes.

To be honest, we were quite taken aback... but just looking at the results of what had happened, I could see that the previously incredibly heavy atmosphere had improved by quite a lot. So... I decided to interpret this as Puurin-san’s way of being considerate, seeing as he wasn’t great with words. Or should I say, that’s what I wanted to believe.

Taking much longer than we had, Puurin-san tasted his pudding at a leisurely pace, finally clapping his hands together with a “Thanks for the meal.”

“Well, before we continue where we left off, let’s talk a bit about what you’ll do from here.”

“... What... I’ll do... from here...?”

Kuroneko put herself on guard, and I understood why. She was probably worried about what he was going to say this time.

“Yes, from here... in other words, with regards to your next project.”

“Eh...? Next?”

Kuroneko widened her eyes and repeated his statement as a question.

“Umm... but you told me you couldn’t use what I gave you, and this was the last time we would meet because of my connections...”

“Yes. From what I read of your manuscript, I am unable to take you on as your editor. As I said before, if you really want to debut with our firm, get your manuscript through our company’s rookie competition. Without using your connections, in the usual established way. Not doing that would be quite sneaky.”

“... I understand.”

It was the same verbal exchange as before... or so I thought, but Puurin-san continued with a “But...”

“I would welcome any additional manuscripts you send to me. Please understand that I would only be giving you advice on it, and I wouldn’t help you more than that, and I wouldn’t be helping you get it published. But if you want... or rather, before that, if you’re not fed up after today’s session...”

If you’re prepared to get heavily criticized once more, please come again.

That’s what he appeared to be saying.

Kuroneko took one deep breath, and nodded with an “... Alright.”

“... I look forward to working with you.”

“... Yes, me too. It's just that, to say the least, the way you are now, things would be out of the question, so please don't get your hopes up too much. I would ask that you do not neglect your schoolwork or other things and misunderstand this situation as your being accepted by an editor. There really are very few people who can successfully debut, and speaking from the experience I have with the authors that work with me... there are people who will take ten years between the time they are accepted by an editor and the time they actually debut their work. And then, even though they work so hard to debut like that, if their work doesn't sell they will just fade back into obscurity... so please, make sure your own life is your top priority.”

Almost like he was warning Kuroneko, Puurin-san repeated his blunt words, and at the end even lowered his head.

.... So... in a word...

“... So, you're trying to tell me that the probability of me debuting with your company is rather low?”

“Yes, exactly.”

He said yes! Even though he had just made her cry a little while ago! It really seems like “subtlety” is not in this old man's dictionary!

“And... that's not the only thing I want to say. I don't know if this is putting it correctly... but, to so called “wannabes” like Kuroneko-san, debuting comes first and foremost. Of course, that's not an incorrect way of thinking. But, from our standpoint, debuting is the beginning. It's not the goal.”

All in one breath.

“After you debut, things will be different than when you were an amateur. Deadlines spring up, new information and material pop up and you have to craft new stories using

those. There will even be times where you don't even have time to absorb all this new information but you'll still just have to keep on writing. The one thing that you can depend on at times like those are the experiences you've gained through life. Even if you take a detour along the way... for example, if you found something else you wanted to do, and decided to pursue that for a while, the experience you gain there is definitely not useless. This probably sounds rather extreme and these might be words that would anger most novelist hopefuls... but you should pursue some other line of work until you retire, and then debut as a novelist with your wealth of life experience. Even if you did things like that, you wouldn't be late to the game."

That is certainly quite extreme. As expected, the old man suggested the easygoing route.

Even though she wants to become a novelist now, he talked about doing something forty years down the line. And also, this is something I've been thinking up to now, not only does this guy sound like he's giving us a lecture, but he's terribly longwinded. But, he seemed to be honestly trying to be sincere and considerate, and I could tell that he was speaking seriously. This was also what he did as a job, so there wasn't really a reason he would be lecturing us. Well, annoying things are annoying, so I found myself almost wishing he would drop dead from a heart attack right now... but it might not be a bad idea to have some faith in him, I think.

Puurin-san looked Kuroneko in the eyes as he spoke onwards.

"What I just said... did you take it as me trying to get you to give up your dream of becoming a novelist?"

"Yes, I feel like you're lecturing and patronizing me⁷⁹, saying something like 'You should listen to my advice when I say that you should try doing something else. Because you have no talent.' It's quite unpleasant."

Did this bitch just say "yes" straight out?! And what's more, she felt unpleasant because he was being patronizing?! Certainly, I sort of agreed with her, but that's not something you can say out loud! Why do you have to speak so aggressively no matter who you're talking to?! What happened to the girl who was sitting here and quietly negotiating with him?! Did she die or something?!

⁷⁹Literally, "looking at me from above with your eyes."

“Hahaha, patronizing and unpleasant, hm?”

At Kuroneko’s tactless remarks, Puurin-san raised his voice for the first time and laughed.

He looked seriously scary. Did her words anger him...?

“Ah, but I’m sorry. Certainly, I probably sounded like I was lecturing you. Looking like this and being this old, there aren’t many people who would say something like that to me, so it’s difficult for me to realize when I’m being that way.”

“Not surprising.”

Kuroneko’s poisonous mouth just kept on going. She’s completely returned back to her old personality, hasn’t she?

“Yeah. Well, while I’m here lecturing and patronizing you, let me give you the punchline. Kuroneko-san, please realize that your time as a ‘wannabe’ is very precious. Whether or not you end up debuting with our company, it’s good that you have things that would make you want to go and earn money. In your case, there are other things that you want to do just as much as this, right? You’re still young, so go have various experiences, see various things, and enjoy your life. I think that’s a good shortcut to becoming a novelist. You don’t have to be in such a hurry. It’s a matter of your own future, so please think about it slowly and carefully.”

“... Thank you for your opinion. I will try my best.”

She said that really sarcastically... well, that’s fine and all, but it’s not doing wonders for my nerves.

“Yes, please try your best. It’s good to listen to the advice of those older than you.”

Puurin-san didn’t seem like he wanted to give up and replied to Kuroneko. And then...

“Well, let me give you this. It’s my email address and cell phone number. Please use this to contact me.”

He took a business card out from his bag. When Kuroneko took the card from him, her eyes widened.

“N-Niisan, this is...”

“W-What’s wrong?”

At Kuroneko’s strange expression, I put myself on my guard and stared at the lettering on the business card.

MediAscii Works Second Editorial Department, Dengeki Books Editorial Division...

“Eh...? Wait... t-this name...”

Swish! Swish! Becoming more and more bewildered, I looked back and forth between the business card and the editor in front of me.

“... Ah, sorry, did I confuse you?”

And then, Puurin-san, seeming to misunderstand why we were surprised...

“... Let me clear that up. My real name is Kumagai Ryuunosuke... Nice to meet you.”

He offered that simple explanation as to why the name he gave us was different from the name on his business card.

4.7 Fourth Chapter Part Seven

It was a few days later. We were in a Media Ascii Works conference room. On the fifth-floor of the building... in other words, right above where the Second Editorial Department was. We were sitting on a sofa that surrounded the long table in the room. There were decorative plants placed in the corners of the room that gave the room just a bit of color. It was a simple, plain reception area. According to Puurin-san, it was a room intended for large meetings or magazine interviews.

Along the fifth floor hallway, conference rooms like this were lined up one after the other like karaoke rooms.

We were in just one of those conference rooms. Only Kuroneko and I were here, sitting side by side on the sofa and waiting for the appointed time.

Perhaps it was the fault of the soundproof walls, but the interior of the room was dead silent. It almost made my ears hurt.

“You know, you really didn’t have to come.”

“... Niisan. That’s the third time you’ve said that.”

Kuroneko faced front, and spoke without even sending a glance in my direction... also, even though nobody else was here, she continued to faithfully call me “niisan.” My real little sister didn’t even call me that, so each time she said that I felt a bit embarrassed...

“The ship has already set sail. Or do you intend to leave me out at the end after having me accompany you up until now?”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do...”

“Also, I detest people who can cause me to go through such unpleasant things. So I want to be here and relish in the moment when they fire this person... you won’t mind if I kick them a bit too, right?”

“I do mind. Stop it.”

Her words were filled with pronounced weariness and hateful resentment.

As I suspected, having been subjected to such harsh criticism for over four hours was still grating on her nerves.

That previous meeting was just a bit... Even I, who was just listening as an innocent bystander, couldn't get his voice out of my head, and even had a dream about it that night. Did all editors treat everyone so harshly during business meetings?

This segment here just won't do; you should fix this part here; also, this part is not good either...

It was just so annoying~~! Idiot! Was there anything you *didn't* think was bad?! Dammit! If you're going to be like that, why don't you just write the damn thing?! I really wanted to just throw the manuscript at his face.

But I didn't.

Well, it's not like it's possible to make something that would please everyone.

That was true no matter what you were, whether you were a police officer, a Japanese sweets maker, or a novelist.

... Well, there's still a bit of time left, so let me explain what's going on right now.

Puurin-san was precisely the person we had been searching for, Kumagai Ryuunosuke.

Call it fortunate if you want, but once Kuroneko had finished badmouthing him, I decided to just explain the situation to him directly. About the other reason we had come to the editorial department.

When I showed him the business card we had brought with us, that of Kumagai Ryuunosuke, Puurin-san aka Kumagai confirmed that it was indeed his card. It seemed that he had a different set of business cards for the Dengeki Books Editorial Department and the Mobile Division. It also seemed that the Mobile Division was created for the sake of public image, and that the staff belonging to it was essentially the same as the staff at the Dengeki Books Editorial Department. They operated out of the same place, and the same editors worked there.

That explanation might have been a bit difficult to understand, so I'll just repeat what Kumagai-san had told us verbatim...

"This is quite a complex matter I suppose, but if I had to explain it, I would say that it's a strategy to maintain our public image. The target audience for cell phone novels is young women, so we have to try to hide the moe moe sides of the business. So, the mobile division might have the same staff as Dengeki Books, but we say to the public that it's a separate department. The public homepages of the two departments also don't mention each other. That's why we use different business cards for each side of the business... I apologize if that confused you."

That's how he explained it. I had been agonizing over how to find a way to Kumagai Ryuunosuke in the Mobile Division from the meeting with the Dengeki Books editor we had snagged with the help of Saori's connections, but... it turned out that the person we met was Kumagai Ryuunosuke himself. What's more, the Kumagai Ryuunosuke we met was a scary-looking old man, and bore not the slightest resemblance to the elite-looking, suit-wearing Kumagai Ryuunosuke that Kirino had met.

So the person Kirino had met really might have been an imposter. That realization really raised goose bumps on our flesh.

"By the way, where did you get that card?"

"Umm, before that, there's something I wanted to ask you..."

I quickly turned the conversation to the topic of *Maisora*, what we had originally come to talk about. It's just that... well, everyone already knows this all too well, but I was quite a chicken. So I didn't immediately broach the topic of plagiarism, instead just asking a few

questions about “Rino,” the alleged author of *Maisora*.

“Ahh, Rino-sensei? To be honest, the one I was talking about before, the one that worked hard for ten years to finally debut with us, that’s Rino-sensei. After she switched recently to writing cell phone novels, her writing got much more interesting... it’s like she was completely different person. I honestly was quite moved that someone like that had the talent to write something like this. You could say I was shocked. Maybe it was my own incompetence for not realizing she had this much talent even though I was in charge of her for so long... seriously... I was surprised... and regretful... dear me, this is just an editor’s intuition, but I have a feeling that the novel is going to become quite popular.”

Kumagai-san spoke passionately and confidently. He was probably excited that someone he was managing for so long was finally beginning a brilliant debut.

Well, it was pretty clear by now I think. This “Rino” was undoubtedly the mastermind behind this plagiarism scheme.

“What was the matter with Rino-sensei?”

“... Ahh, well, that is...”

Ah, it’s almost time. Let’s end the recollection here, and the rest I’ll explain bit by bit later.

The conference room door opened, and Kumagai-san appeared. A single person entered the room after him.

Once that other person realized we were sitting on the couch, she blinked.

“Hm?”

It wasn’t easy to tell she was a girl from her voice, but her voice definitely carried well. She was wearing a pair of deep blue pant suits, and her hair was short. There was a beauty mark under her left eye, and she looked like she was in her mid-20s. She was quite tall for a girl, and she almost had no breasts at all. If she wiped off her makeup and took off her earrings,

it wouldn't be difficult to mistake her for a pretty-looking boy. She was wearing feminine clothing though, and so she gave off the air of being a secretary to a company president or something.⁸⁰

“Hey, Kumagai-san, I thought today we were having a business meeting to discuss the second volume of *Maisora*? Ah, maybe we have the wrong room?”

“No, this is the right room. Let me introduce Kousaka-san and Kuroneko-san. They have something important to tell Fate-chan.”⁸¹

F-Fate-chan?

“Hey, Kumagai-san, I told you to stop calling me Fate-chan~~. I'm writing under the penname 'Rino' now, so like I told you before, call me that from now on.”

... It seemed that this was “Rino.” And she seemed to have no problems asking other people to call her that... and right in front of me, no less... the image of my little sister sick in bed popped up in my head and I felt my insides coming to a boil.

Although, it probably wasn't a good idea to openly get angry at this stage of the game.

Pushing down my anger, I stood up and greeted her.

“Nice to meet you.”

“... Nice to meet you.”

Next to me, Kuroneko followed my lead. This girl called Fate-chan (I really didn't want to call her Rino) looked baffled as she returned our greetings.

⁸⁰The different standards of gender equality in Japan and the West really comes through in this line. She isn't the company president, she's his secretary. Alright, SUPERFLUOUS SOCIAL COMMENTARY
AUTHOR NOTE HAS ENDED.

⁸¹Terrible nickname choice. Now I won't be able to get Fate Testarossa's image out of my head when reading about this person...

“Ahh, hello... nice to meet you. I’m Rino... hmm? Kumagai-san?”

“Well well, let’s just sit down for a bit, and you should listen to what these two have to say.”

“... I don’t mind, I guess. Ah, I see, they want to find out more about me, right? I just got out of an interview though... so, what? Are these fans that have read the web version of the book?”

That’s how she seemed to be interpreting the situation. Suddenly cheering up, she sat across from us. By the way, through all this, Kumagai-san remained standing by the entrance, emitting dark waves of menace.

“Well, nice to meet you two, then. Are you two siblings? Your little sister is quite cute.”

“... Ahh, well, yes, we are.”

Would I be able to break her composure in the allotted time I had agreed upon with Kumagai-san? For now, we had come with a plan, but it wasn’t a plan that I was absolutely certain would succeed. Whether or not we would be able to get Kirino’s novel back depended on how we fought this battle.

Kuroneko made the first move.

“... Can I just ask you one thing?”

“Of course! What is it?”

She responded in a cheerful voice. She seemed to have entered into her fan-pandering mode.

Kuroneko opened her mouth. I wondered what angle she would attack from, but...

“What kind of name is Fate-chan?”

Really? From that angle? ... Although, it was something I was curious about too.

Schhhlp! The girl’s face tightened up incredibly quickly. Panicked, she quickly tried to recover, but the smile she showed us was incredibly stiff. It seemed like a question that was hard for her to answer. Well, serves you right.

“... It’s my middle name. My full name is ‘Iori Fate Setsuna’...”

“... So you mean, it was your former penname?”

Kuroneko was baiting her. Well, let’s see how she answers that...

“I-It’s my real name.”

What... did she say...?

“... What did you say just now?”

“‘Iori Fate Setsuna’ is my real name, I said...! Terrible, isn’t it?! It’s a name that shows up a lot in anime and light novels, isn’t it?! But what can I do when my parents decide to name me like that...?! I’m only three-quarters Japanese! I also think it’s an embarrassing name... s-so, enough with that!”

“... I think it’s a cool name though...”

You’re actually being serious, aren’t you? Don’t look so jealous.

Kuroneko’s eyes sparkled, her cheeks flushed, and her breathing became ragged. The name Iori Fate Setsuna seemed to really tug at her heartstrings.

“... Can I call you Fate-chan?”

“No! D-Didn’t you listen to a word I said?!”

This girl seriously had a talent for annoying people. She wasn’t even trying to provoke her, but it just came naturally. Well, I got a bit of a kick out of it this time though.

In fact, just do it more.

“Ugh... I told Kumagai-san already, but please call me ‘Rino.’ I’m publishing a book under that name, after all.”

“That’s impossible. I can’t call you ‘Rino.’”

Just baiting her along wouldn’t lead us anywhere, so it was time to get down to business. I spoke to Fate.

“Because you aren’t the author of ‘Maisora.’”

“... Huh? What are you saying so suddenly?”

Bewildered, Fate cocked her head to the side. That should have taken her completely by surprise, but she didn’t seem very shaken. She was playing dumb quite perfectly. Dammit, did I mess up how I said that...?

Kuroneko snorted, as if commenting on how my ploy had been no help at all. With an air that said “Step down, I’ll handle things from here,” she faced Fate and did what she did best.

“... Don’t play dumb, you fucking insect. You’re despicable, aren’t you, you piece of scum? We’ve come this far, and you still intend to annoy me?”

Kuroneko-san, t-that was quite something so suddenly!

Calling her a fucking insect in that eerie chanting tone of yours?! In her place, I would just burst out into tears!

“Y-You, be quiet for a bit.”

Kuroneko was probably just trying to speak like she usually did, so for someone like me who had gotten used to her poisonous mouth, I really couldn't think anything of it other than “Well, here we go again...” But just look at Fate's face! It was almost like the words were a bit *too* sharp, and the pain wasn't even registering!

“W... What did you say?”

“W-Well, I mean... she was talking about how you stole *Maisora*, you know...?”

Even I would admit that my method of questioning was too soft. Honestly, I probably wouldn't be cut out for being a detective.

“K-Kumagai-san! What is the meaning of these rude people?! They're accusing me of theft!!”

Fate stood up violently as she pointed to us two. Her shout was harsh and serious, but Kumagai-san stood stock still like a member of the Secret Service⁸² and responded in his usual calm tone.

“... According to those two, the true author of *Maisora* was their little sister, and you conned the manuscript from her and passed it off as your own work. They also claimed that you used my business card to pose as an editor.”

Kumagai-san took out the business card that had Fate's cell phone number and mailing address on it, and placed it on the desk. Fate gave a single glance at the business card, and once again returned her gaze to Kumagai-san.

⁸²“Security police.” Essentially the same thing, but not limited to protecting the President.

“Don’t tell me you actually believe what they’re saying? We get claims like this all the time.”

“... Leaving aside what I think about the matter, this is a genuine business card belonging to me. And the contact information printed on it is the same as Fate-chan’s. Of course, these things could mean anything. They could mean anything, but... there are elements in this case that put it on a different level than the usual claims we deal with. So, I called Fate-chan over here so we can deal with this.”

“I can’t believe this! Kumagai-san, are you saying you doubt me?!”

Fate yelled desperately. If Kumagai-san really completely believed in her innocence, he probably would have told her beforehand that we were here waiting for her. She probably realized that.

The editor she had worked so hard with for years and years had possibly come to doubt her.

Her bitter yell was probably not an act. Even though she was my enemy, I couldn’t help but sympathize with her a bit.

“No, we were the ones who made Kumagai-san set up this meeting. We asked him to let us talk to you in private for the first thirty minutes at least. And we asked him to keep the purpose of this meeting a secret from Fate-san and to just call you over.”

“I told you to stop calling me Fate!”

She really didn’t like that name. She honestly looked and sounded pretty scary, but I wasn’t frightened off by it.

“... I just want to clear things up. Speaking personally, I am hoping that their claims of theft are just wild delusions. If that’s the case, there’s no issue. Fate-chan’s innocence would be proven, and not only would these two be strictly reprimanded, but they would be banned from this editorial department. Don’t I say this often? That I am always your ally, since I’m your editor.”

Those were probably his true feelings. He listened to our story, let us show him the proof we had, and setup the meeting we were in now... but he was definitely not on our side. Considering he had just met us a few days ago, when compared to the novelist he had been working with for a long time, we were much less trustworthy to him. That much went without saying.

“... I understand, if Kumagai-san puts it that way... I guess I have no choice. I'll play along with this little farce.”

Upon hearing her editor's words, Fate seemed to have regained her composure.

“I'll listen to what you two have to say. Umm... what was it? That I had stolen this novel? I want to get this over with quickly, so let's start from the heart of the issue. You have proof, right?”

Tch... I knew this was coming eventually, but I guess we're starting from there.

This person hijacked Kirino's account on the submission website, and upon securing the manuscript data that was on there, she posted the entirety of *Maisora* online.

Because of that, the evidence that Kirino was the real author of *Maisora* had been wiped clear.

It was quite a cunning method.

“Let me just say that I definitely did no such thing, and that *Maisora* was written by me, and is my work. You appear to say differently, in which case you should take responsibility for making a false accusation.”

“Ugh...”

It was too early to give up. Yes, it wasn't as if all the evidence had disappeared. As I looked for the item in question in my bag, Fate faced Kuroneko and scrutinized her.

“By the way, you over there. Who exactly are you? You’ve been mouthing off to me, but do you really think you can get away with having that attitude?”

“What an idiot. Why do I need to be respectful to a thief? You’re pretty cocky for a crap wannabe who wasn’t able to take off for ten years. Stealing the garbage that other people write and pretending to be a decent writer with that? How tragic. Honestly, is your life worth anything at all?”

“Don’t screw with me and answer me! Do you have proof?! Or don’t you?! Which one is it?!”

“Hah, you’re showing your true colors, aren’t you, you fool? I was wondering what kind of garbage you were going to spit out with that filthy mouth of yours, but of all things, it was just ‘Do you have proof?’... ku ku ku ku... you sound just like a cliché villain with that line. It’s almost as if you’ve half-admitted your own guilt ku ku ku... The end is nigh... Feel free to just die in my arms...”

What kind of demon queen are you supposed to be? Go back to Alefgard,⁸³ you dimwit.

If it was a competition over who could sound more like a villain though, then there was no doubt that Kuroneko would win.

Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten that we’re here for Kirino’s sake.

Seeing that Kuroneko was not being affected in the slightest, no matter how much she yelled, Fate was taken aback. But... after that one moment, the atmosphere suddenly changed completely.

“Kuroneko-san... was it? This is advice from the bottom of my heart. It would be good for you to stop such unbecoming behavior. You’ll come to really regret it.”⁸⁴

⁸³The original setting for Dragon Quest.

⁸⁴Quite literally, “you’ll come to want to kill your past self.”

Her tone was quite sober. She gave off the impression that she was looking at something incredibly annoying.

She was quite a different person from when she was answering the accusations of theft. She spoke with the sincerity of an adult speaking to a child, and with the compassion of someone who was speaking to a younger version of themselves.

“... It’s none of your business.”

Quite unusual for her, Kuroneko laid her expression bare. It was almost as if she had been forced to look at something she didn’t want to look at, as if she was gazing into a mirror which showed an unsightly, older version of herself.

But that lasted for only a second, and she quickly returned to a mocking expression.

She gave a quick glance, and plastered on a sickly sweet smile while jutting out her chin.

“... Please tell her, my dear Watson.⁸⁵ Show this incompetent criminal who thinks that she’s managed to destroy all the evidence the hell we have prepared.”

“Who the hell is Watson, you little...”

Geez... it seems we’re finally getting to the heart of the matter. Trying to dampen my nervousness, I did as commanded by this jakigan detective and took out this hell... or rather, the evidence we had brought. Kirino’s cell phone and notebook.

“... Could it be that there was manuscript data left? But even so-”

“Take a look for yourself, here. This is the proof that my little sister was the author of *Maisora*.”

I passed the cell phone and notebook over to Fate. In that notebook was written the plot

⁸⁵Reference to Sherlock Holmes, of course. This reference makes me happy.

and the data notes that my sister had gathered for writing *Maisora*. On Christmas Eve, I had gone with her to Shibuya... we had walked around the 109 building, went shopping at an accessory shop, watched a live musical performance, she suddenly poured water over herself and sat shivering, and for her to be able to take a shower I reluctantly went with her to a love hotel, and she even took the opportunity to take notes in there... those experiences were bound together in that notebook.

That was the proof that Kirino was the author of *Maisora*.

By the way, we had already shown these two pieces of evidence to Kumagai-san. So if Fate tried to break the cell phone or rip up the notebook, it would be counted as a self-admission of guilt. Even she probably understood that much. Eventually, she flipped through the notebook and frowned.

I thought she was becoming desperate upon having evidence shoved in her face... but she pointed to a corner of the notebook.

“What’s up with this weird drawing here? ... Some mean-looking version of the Yaranaio?”⁸⁶

“That’s not what I wanted you to look at! Look at what’s written, what’s written in the middle! Those sketches... they’re probably drawings of me.”

I mean, during Kirino’s data gathering, I got angry, confused, upset, close to tears... and those were probably drawings of me during those times. And there were even little captions to accompany them.

Honestly, I couldn’t deny that they were strange, terrible drawings.

And then, written next to the drawings...

→ A drawing of the idiot when he apologized to the shopkeeper after not having enough money to pay for an accessory (^0^).

⁸⁶A meme-ish piece of ascii art. Feel free to look it up.

“Sorry I don’t have enough money,” he said! Haha! So gross! (lol)

← I made him buy me earrings. I let the idiot choose one himself, but he has no sense at all and spent such a long time! (^_^;)

^ The idiot got really pissed when I got all wet (>_<) How much of a siscon is he?! wwwww⁸⁷

← The idiot got all excited seeing his little sister in a bathrobe. Nuuuuu, Kiririn’s chastity is in danger?!

Agh~~~!!! Kill me now~~~!! I don’t want to remember any of that, just kill me now~~~!!

Also, that curly handwriting just pissed me off!⁸⁸ Every single little word got on my nerves.

Also, what the hell?! Why does the guy presenting the evidence here have to be subject to such torture?!

I wanted her to just look at the plot and the data written there, not to stare at the little drawings Kirino made of me!!

“... Both the things I just handed to you are the things my little sister collected for the sake of writing *Maisora*. That cell phone also has the photos she took on Christmas Eve.”

“.....”

Fate fell into silence, and looked over the things Kirino had prepared in order to write *Maisora*.

⁸⁷The “w’s are basically “lol.” Thanks to meh for digging up that little piece of information.

⁸⁸Not really something I can convey here in the translation, but her handwriting was really... round.

“... Hmph. Did you think that this was sufficient proof?”

“P-Pretty much.”

“I looked over all of this, but... yes, it certainly is quite well done. It does certainly feel like the childish notes a junior high school student would make. Ahh, yes, yes, I see. I can see that you believed that your sister wrote *Maisora* after she showed you these. Ahah, you two really are quite big siscons, aren't you?”

Fate chuckled, and tossed Kirino's cell phone and notebook back this way.

“So, who cares?”

“Well...”

“Yes. That's just some delusional data your sister made up after reading *Maisora*.”

Fate spoke shamelessly. I could feel blood suddenly rushing to my head...

“You-”

I felt a sharp elbow in my side and stopped moving. Kuroneko had inferred what I was about to do and had nipped it in the bud. She probably had learned to read my actions ever since I had yelled at Kumagai-san back then.

I was out of commission, and in my place, Kuroneko began to speak in a calm voice.

“How do you explain the timestamp on the photos? They were all taken at Shibuya on Christmas Eve.”

“So? I'm not too familiar with cell phones, but it's not difficult to forge digital data, right? Or rather, maybe it was just a coincidence.”

“Coincidence...?”

“Yes. Ah, this is probably close to what happened, right? That is, your sister happened to take a lot of photos at Shibuya on Christmas Eve and stored them on her phone. And then she realized that the setting of *Maisora* was the same as the photos she herself took, and then she started to say that she was the author of *Maisora*! And then, of course, it was your cute little sister telling you these things, so in your stupidity you completely were taken in, and without even considering what a bother you would be, you took the issue all the way to the Shinjuku publishing company. Ahaha, what an idiot simpleton, ahh, how embarrassing.”

Right then, Fate mocked Kuroneko with as much condescension as she could muster.

“Geez, this is why brats like you are so much trouble. You’re causing trouble for us adults, so keep your childish delusions to the confines of your own room, please.”

“.....”

All the light vanished from Kuroneko’s eyes. To make matters worse, her pupils that I was sure had been black up until then had at some point become red.

“**Nomobuyowoshihashitawadokeda...**”⁸⁹

“Stop your chanting! I have no idea what’s going on, but be quiet! Return to your senses!”

Kuroneko had suddenly stood up and began chanting some nonsensical spell or something, and I held her back from behind and stopped her.

You aren’t calm at all, are you?! I was so surprised I even forgot about my anger!

⁸⁹Ok for those of you astute enough, this is indeed the first half or so of the transformation chant from Kore wa Zombie. No, she’s not actually saying that. She’s chanting something and every friggin character is written in archaic Japanese, so instead of spending half an hour translating a single nonsensical line syllable by syllable, I just copy and pasted some chant-sounding stuff from somewhere else. It gets the job done.

Also, you're really damn strong, aren't you?! Was this the so-called placebo effect?!

"Let me go, niisan, you won't be able to kill her."⁹⁰

"Don't say such disturbing things!"

As I restrained Kuroneko with all my might, I yelled at Fate.

"Also, you cut it out! My little sister really isn't that cute! If she really ran her mouth with delusional claims like that, I would have smacked her and shut her up myself already!"

It probably wouldn't have happened that way in reality, but I could probably retort with something like that... in my heart at least!

"... The ones who are being unreasonable are you two... enough is enough. You two are just pathetic."

For some reason, Fate watched our exchange with a pained expression, and sent us a scornful look.

"In any case... if you've said all you wanted to say, we're going to end here. The thirty minute mark is coming up soon, so I won't be playing along past this. Is that alright, Kumagai-san?"

"... Yes, it is."

Kumagai-san nodded expressionlessly. As I said before, we had already shown Kirino's cell phone and notebook to Kumagai-san. He told us the exact same thing - that these things alone were insufficient. Kumagai-san was fundamentally on her side. And it's not like we could choose a more impartial judge.

⁹⁰This is probably a hidden reference to an incident where a girl was obsessed with a guy in an MMO, got jealous of another girl who hung out with him in the MMO, and tracked her down in real life and hurt her. Or something.[j/a](#)

But...

“We still have proof. Something decisive.”

Dramatically, I took out my final trump card.

It was a bundle of A4 sized paper.

“Kousaka-san, that is...?”

“It’s the sequel to *Maisora*. My little sister wrote it.”

Geez... I was really surprised when I found out this thing existed.

We were working hard to deal with this plagiarism issue, but we had kept that a secret from Kirino.

So, we had a really hard time gathering every piece of evidence. A little while ago, just like a certain someone had done, I snuck into my sister’s room. I waited until she had gone downstairs to eat, and stealthily searched through her room. At any other time, she would have been stuck in bed, and the door would have been locked... I mean, if I had been found out, that would have been the end of me, so even though I could say it was for a just cause for the sake of my sister, I felt incredibly self-conscious and guilty during that.

While I was in there, I couldn’t help myself from thinking “*What the hell am I doing...?*”

But, you can’t say I didn’t get results. When I borrowed my sister’s notebook and was checking through it, I found scribbles relating to a sequel for *Maisora*, and when I searched more deeply I found another notebook.

And, in that notebook I found two passwords listed, one for “work use” and one for “personal use.” They both seemed to be passwords for the Cell Phone i-Club. But on the “work use page,” entering the password returned an “Incorrect Password” error and I couldn’t login

with it.

In other words, the “work use” page was the site that Fate had hijacked, and the site where the manuscript of *Maisora* had been kept.

And then, on the “personal use” page, there was the thing that Kuroneko had called a rape novel, and a cell phone novel titled *Maisora Another Side: Little Sister's Perspective*. When I read the latter, it seemed to be the story of *Maisora* told from the perspective of the protagonist's little sister, Shiori. You could call it a sequel in a sense. When Kirino had said that the little sister was an incredibly important character, she wasn't lying.

To summarize, it was like this:

Kirino had registered separate pages for “work use” and “personal use,” and the “work use” site, where the *Maisora* manuscript had been stored, was stolen by Fate.

However, the “personal use” page remained, and therein lay what could be called a sequel to *Maisora*, or rather a different version of *Maisora*.

I mean, I was admittedly pretty confused as to why that thing was there. Kirino had only been directed by the fake Kumagai-san to write just the one cell phone novel with Rino as the protagonist. So, what was the point in writing a continuation novel that wasn't even going to be published? That's what I thought... but...

It was not that cut and dry. She probably just wrote this novel because she wanted to write it.

In any case...

“Earlier, Fa... Setsuna-san said it, right? That she thought this was a meeting to discuss a sequel for *Maisora*... right? And, the sequel that Setsuna-san wrote for *Maisora* already exists, and Kumagai-san has already read it, has he not?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

Kumagai-san answered straightforwardly. Fate turned pale and bared her teeth.

“S-So what?”

“So... I’m saying that we should read both of these and compare them. Comparing both with the original, it should be easy to make clear which one is the real thing and which one is the fake. Am I wrong?”

“Are you saying that whichever one is better is the real one?! That’s just a subjective opinion! You can’t possibly think that you can tell between real and fake with just-”

“Heh, I guess you’re afraid to lose.”

I brazenly challenged her. I modeled my tone after Kirino and Kuroneko.

“... What did you say?”

“If you didn’t hear me the first time, I can repeat it however many times you want. Someone like Rino-sensei, who’s been training to be a novelist for over ten years and finally, happily made her professional debut, has no confidence in winning against a delusional junior high school student.”

This was definitely a gamble. For one, she might not take the bait, and even if she did, if her sequel novel turned out to be better than Kirino’s, then this all would have been for naught.

But well... this is what I think. Even though I’m just a novice who doesn’t know anything about cell phone novels.

The book Kirino wrote... take the absolutely unlikeable characters, or the simple premise and story filled with overly-convenient events, or the overly-idealistic, delusional dialogue between Rino and Toshi...

Those were things that came from Kirino, and were hers and hers alone. She put her all into thinking about her novel, even took her despised older brother out to collect data, and I'm sure her novel was profoundly influenced by her real life experiences up to this point.

She had taken a break off from her modeling and club activities and just kept on writing and writing and writing... and like that this novel had come to fruition. And for that reason, her novel had been very well-received by this age's girls, and had become quite popular.

And so...

"There's no way the real thing would lose to the fake. That's what I firmly believe."

4.8 Fourth Chapter Part Eight

And then, the time of reckoning had arrived.

The manuscript Kirino had written versus the one Fate had written. Having read both of them many, many times, Kumagai-san resolutely put them back on the desk, and gave out a long, leisurely sigh.

"Fuehhh....."

He closed his eyes and sunk into thought. His already fiendish face tightened into something even more sinister, and he let out an almost poisonous-looking breath. After that, we sat there in silence for a long, long, long, long, long time... and finally, he solemnly opened his mouth.

"Let me tell you what I've decided."

Kumagai-san took one of the two manuscripts on the table and pushed it into the center of the table.

“This one was much more interesting.”

It was the one I had handed over... in other words, the one Kirino had written.

“... So you mean...”

“Yes. I think that this one is the real one.”

“... Really?!”

Uwaaaah, as expected from a pro editor! Amazing! Being able to judge impartially between the manuscript of the novelist he was in charge of and the manuscript we had just shoved in his face... and he saw that Kirino's was the real one! You're great, Kumagai-san! I'm sorry for ever doubting you!

Without thinking, I took up a guts pose. Wanting to share this moment of exaltation, I looked next to me, but to no effect, seeing as Kuroneko was staring at Kumagai-san with her usual emotionless expression.

“That's...”

Fate paled and seemed completely nonplussed, but the minute she came back to her senses, she grabbed at Kumagai-san.

“Y-You're my editor, aren't you?! Do you have any idea what you just said?!”

“Yes, of course. This is an exceedingly serious problem. After I report this to the higher ups, I'll have to consider my own resignation.”

“What...?!?!”

At Kumagai-san's unexpected answer, the furious Fate was at a completely loss for words.

If there was something wrong with the novelist, some of the blame would probably fall on that novelist's editor.

And Kumagai-san had acknowledged that Kirino's novel was the real one, even though he knew of the consequences. If I were in his place, I might have just continued to deny everything despite the evidence. As much as he was an old man that pissed me off in a few ways, when it came to work he was a sincere and honest person.

"This is probably the last project I'll ever do."

Kumagai-san laughed a bit, and then started speaking in the same ruthless tone he had taken up when criticizing Kuroneko's novel that other day.

"... The manuscript that Fate-chan sent me sounded and looked exactly like something 'Rino' would write... but that really was it. Apart from the cosmetic similarities, the heart and soul of the work was completely different. The pure simplicity of the characters or the bizarre plot twists that I saw in the first novel, the things that excited me and got me to the edge of my seat, were nowhere to be found in this manuscript. In a word, it wasn't interesting at all. I really can't believe that this was written by the same 'Rino,' and I'm almost certain it wouldn't sell well as the sequel to the very promising 'Maisora.' Even if these two hadn't come forward, you would have to rewrite... no, to re-plan the entire thing, I think."

"....."

As usual, the old man was merciless.

I really do think there was probably a better way he could have put it...

But regardless, this wasn't something Rino had written. This wasn't something that would sell well. Having received the full force of Kumagai-san's biting criticism, Fate took it almost exactly the same as Kuroneko had taken such criticism a few days ago, and hung her head in shame.

Kumagai-san picked up the manuscript that Kirino had written.

“This one is definitely something ‘Rino’ had written. To be blunt, it’s quite interesting. It’s even more ridiculous than the first volume, and the author took one too many liberties here and there, but in fact that may not be such a bad thing. I especially liked this ending segment. It ended in a deeply moving scene that rivals Makoto’s scenario from *Kanon*,⁹¹ and it tore my heart to pieces. I am confident that we can send this novel out to the people who had enjoyed *Maisora*.”

Doing a complete 180, Kumagai-san began to give Kirino’s cell phone novel high praise.

This was the first time I saw this person praising something so openly. To think that Kirino’s manuscript could cause him to react so passionately furthered my exaltation... but at the same time, that fuzzy feeling I had felt once before once again swirled in my chest. Unconsciously, I bit my bottom lip.

Why was it that I felt so pained even though our plan had worked out so well?

Of course, there was a person right in front of me who was feeling a hundred times more pain than I was.

“... I see. What I wrote... wasn’t interesting at all...?”

It was Fate. It was almost as if she had grown old over the past minute. All her willpower and energy seemed to have left her.

Completely beaten, Fate seemed to have almost admitted that she had stolen Kirino’s work. As she had aptly said before, whatever Kumagai-san said, it would be nothing more than a subjective opinion.

If she had continued to be defiant and stubbornly feign innocence, it was very possible that she could have complicated the matter and thrown our argument into quicksand.

⁹¹Sigh. Of all the Key Visual Novels you could have made a reference to, you chose *Kanon*? T-T It’s called *Clannad*, Kumagai-san. Or better yet, *Little Busters*. *Little Busters*, which is totally going to get an anime adaptation that doesn’t suck. RIGHT, JC STAFF?! **glares**

And it wasn't as if I had any other cards to play in this situation.

The delicate silence continued for a while longer, until finally, a light smile floated up to the surface of Fate's expression. In a bizarrely calm tone, Fate mumbled.

"... Ahh, I remember now. 'To be blunt, it's quite interesting'... those were the exact words you used the first time you praised my writing as well."

"That's true."

Kumagai-san nodded with a hint of nostalgia.

"... It was my third year in junior high school, wasn't it? I had made it to the final screening round in this company's amateur competition... in those days they called it the Dengeki Game Grand Prize though... and you called me... and invited me to the editorial department in Ochanomizu..."⁹²

It was a common pattern to publish the winning entries of the amateur competitions, but there were also cases where editors would choose to take on authors who hadn't won at their own discretion. Recruit them, so to speak.

"... That really brings me back. At that time, you spent around four hours bashing my work. I was really depressed."

I heard Kuroneko's breath catch. What Fate said reminded us precisely of what had happened a few days ago.

"Ahaha... it really almost embarrasses me to death thinking about that now... but the things I was writing back then... although these words didn't exist at that time... they were just blatant Chuunibyou Jakigan⁹³ novels, weren't they? I had thought they were so good at the time... I was brimming with confidence... and how I behaved back then was just painful to look at."

⁹²Another district in Tokyo.

⁹³Déj? vu? Check the footnotes in Volume 1, Chapter 3-4.

At that, Fate looked sadly at Kuroneko.

“You know, you really remind me of how I was back then. From how you talk, and how you dress... look, our beauty marks are also in the same spot under our eyes... so it really struck a nerve when I saw you acting like that... hey, you don’t have a single friend, do you? You’re completely alone at school, aren’t you? Thinking that you’re more special than others, and believing that you’re different from all the other lower beings around you... Looking down on those around you, blaming your own incompetence and isolation on others, and then finding escape in the world of fiction. ‘Ahh, if terrorists came and attacked this class, I would awaken the dark powers hiding inside me, massacre the attackers, and save these ignorant dogs around me’... can you honestly tell me that you’ve never thought that in the middle of class, looking around the room aimlessly with your head in your hands?”

“.....”

Kuroneko didn’t answer. Her eyes widened for just a second, but immediately returned to their usual emotionless state.

We had never mentioned that Kuroneko had aspirations to be a novelist... it was almost as if she were talking about herself. Well, granted, she was indeed just talking about herself.

“... That has nothing to do with this situation.”

I spoke up for Kuroneko, but Fate couldn’t hold herself back.

“In any case, speaking from experience, you really should relieve yourself of those delusions as quickly as possible. Reality is not that forgiving. No matter how hard you may try, there are some dreams that just won’t come true. There are plenty of things that you just can’t do anything about. This sorry state of mine should prove that more than anything else.”

“As I said, this has nothing to do with-”

Irritatedly, I tried to repeated myself, but Fate cut me off and just continued to talk.

“I know, I know, this is about the story ‘Rino’ wrote, right? Aha, isn’t that hilarious, that someone like me, who has continued to write and write and write for ten years and has barely been able to find time to sleep... that something that I wrote was boring? And then the little brat who began writing a few months ago only half-seriously, with barely any understanding of the rules of good writing... that the novel she wrote would be interesting? A rising star? Expected to be a big hit? ... Hah... what the hell? This... can something like this seriously happen?! That’s ridiculous, isn’t it?!”

“You-!”

Not being able to take her incredibly annoying little ramble any longer, I raised my voice to find some way to shut her up, but...

“Yeah, I agree completely.”

I couldn’t speak upon hearing that voice butt in. I instinctively turned around.

The one who had signaled her agreement with Fate’s bitter speech had been Kuroneko.

Her voice, filled with resentment, was oddly low, and reverberated around the room as if it had come from the depths of hell.

“Even though you bashed what I wrote so harshly, why is it that you can speak so highly of her piece of garbage cell phone novel? I can’t understand this at all. Even though the things I despise the most are well received in the eyes of the world, what I write is insulted and criticized. What do you mean I can’t just write what I want? Wasn’t she doing the same thing when she wrote that? Why am I the only one whose work is completely rejected?”

Kuroneko continued on and on in the same emotionless, blunt tone she always used. But her words were filled with invisible pressure. Filled with the same dark sentiments as Fate’s words had been.

“H-Hey, hey! Hey hey hey! What the hell are you saying so suddenly?!”

I couldn't help but unconsciously butt in at this absolutely unexpected turn of events.

We finally managed to produce some definitive proof, right? Wasn't this the scene where we struck the final, decisive blow against the criminal who was blurting out all her motives in a burst of anger?

We were so close!

So why were you saying things like that here?

It didn't seem like I was the only one who was completely bewildered. Fate also had widened her eyes.

I wasn't surprised, considering someone who had done nothing but spew abuse at her up until now had suddenly went through a complete reversal and was now defending her instead.

“... Y-You... what are you saying?”

“Hmph, I'm saying that I understand how you feel. I might not have been at it as long as you have, but for three years I've been reading textbooks, studying with the help of novel-writing sites, submitting manuscripts, networking... I've continued to write things that I consider good. So isn't it obvious I'm frustrated? Ahh, I'm so frustrated, frustrated, frustrated. And I'm jealous. The one who had so much fun writing that book and then showed it off with such an arrogant expression... and the editor who read it and praised it to high heaven... everyone can just go off and die. It's like that, isn't it?”

“... T-Taking it that far is...”

“Don't even try to lie to me. Just man up and admit it. 'It serves you right, you bastard novelist, and go die, Kumagai'... you've thought that, haven't you? What are you still hesitating for when we've already come this far?”

Don't make things worse, you! And also, you're actually being serious, aren't you?!

"Hmph, to be honest, that girl rubbed me the wrong way from the first time we met. We never see eye to eye, and whenever she opens her mouth all that comes out is self-satisfied crap, and she always looks down on me... on top of that, this shitty cell phone novel that she just began writing a few months back is getting published? Don't screw with me. Do you think I can actually bear something as absurd as that?"

"W-Whose side are you on?! Weren't you here to help get back Kirino's cell phone novel?!"

I yelled, not being able to sit here watching silently anymore. At my words, Kuroneko sneered.

"Whose side am I on, you ask? Are you an idiot? I'm sure I've already said that I'm just here to sate my own curiosity. Why do I have to lower myself and work so hard just to cover someone else's mistakes?"

Wasn't that just an excuse you just gave out of embarrassment...?!

"Hmph, although, you're one to talk. Don't tell me you've never been annoyed about how everything always is about your sister."

"T-That's... that has nothing to do with this!"

"Nothing to do with this? Heh, as if I care. I'm just saying something I've always wanted to say."

"Even if you say it so smoothly, there are just things you can't say!"

Are you Kirino or something?! I almost feel like I'm talking with my little sister here!

What are you trying to do, ignoring the real criminal and taking over this dungeon as the last boss yourself?!

And having lost her role in this little drama, isn't Fate also completely confused right now?!

Ugh! Leaving her outburst aside... well, I mean... it's probably very true that Kuroneko knew how Fate felt.

The frustration of being over taken by someone who had started working after you, even though you've written so much.

The misery of having none of your efforts pay off. In a world that only saw value in things you despised.

And then, the someone who did have her efforts pay off. The someone who was accepted just by doing what she wanted the way she wanted it to be done.

A helpless situation. A reality out of her control.

I don't know exactly what she was feeling. It wasn't my place to say that I understood.

But, thinking about my sister who was so different from the plain old me, thinking about my little sister whom I could never win against no matter how much I tried... I understood the misery that could come from knowing that such a person was right next to me, day after day. And I could sympathize with the feeling of helplessness that came from continually comparing yourself to someone you just couldn't win against.

Why was everything always about my sister?

Ah, that was it.

At that point, I suddenly came to a realization.

Crap, that was it. That was it...

These base feelings of jealousy were precisely the fuzzy feelings that have been swirling around in my chest.

When I realized that Kirino's work had been stolen and all her effort had gone to waste, I honestly was pretty delighted. But then, I saw that pained expression on my little sister's face...

"It serves her right. I consider this payback for her getting so full of herself and making a fool out of me."

The jealousy that came from wondering why she had all the talent, why everything she laid her hands on went well... I think part of that feeling translated into hatred. That was certainly true in recent times. Being able to come closer to her, I was shown once again how amazing she was.

... Geez, I'm a pathetic older brother, aren't I?

At that time, when I saw Kirino trying to act strong with tears coming out of her eyes, I really felt embarrassed.

I mean, because I had gotten so irritated... had gotten so resolved to do something about the issue, to make sure her efforts didn't go to waste, right?

And then, perhaps, this Kuroneko who had been spurting out her gloomy feelings against Kirino for a while now, perhaps she also...

"... I could not care less what happened to that girl. You think I'm here to help her? Don't even joke like that. Honestly, going through some painful experiences would be good for that girl."

Although I felt that all her words reflected her true feelings, they were all made from lies,

bluffs, and excuses. It was almost like I was looking in a mirror. No matter how much I might say things were out of character or didn't have anything to do with me, if someone asked me "well, why the hell are you doing what you're doing then?" I probably wouldn't be able to answer, or wouldn't be able to do anything other than continuing to make pathetic excuses.

"Ugh, she ticks me off. She really ticks me off. Whether I'm asleep or awake, she ticks me off. Everything in this world ticks me off. If only a bomb would fall from the heavens and obliterate everything."

I knew the irritation she was feeling all too well. Everyone can empathize with the feeling of helplessness she was feeling right now.

Yes, we were not here for Kirino's sake at all. We were here for ourselves.

We were just here helplessly trying to do something about these feelings of helplessness.

So, even if this situation gets resolved happily, I definitely didn't want to be thanked by my sister. Kuroneko would probably say the same. If you asked us what we thought of Kirino, both Kuroneko and I would probably give the same exact answer in the same exact way.

We absolutely haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaated that girl!! But...

"But, that is that."

Exactly. I was honestly lost as to what Kuroneko was feeling when she said those words. But that was exactly right. There was no reason behind it. Certainly, I hated my little sister. Absolutely hated her. My pretty, multi-talented sister... just by being next to me, I would be compared to her, would feel a sense of helplessness, and the person herself ridiculed and looked down at me.

But, even then, I couldn't do anything here but yell like this. I'm her brother, after all.

“Hey, listen to me, Setsuna-san!”

“...?!”

Suddenly being talked to, Fate trembled in surprise.

Not concerned about her reaction, I raised my voice up loud.

“What you stole was something my sister had put her all into writing! Something she had tried so hard to write! She put in much, much more effort than I did on this! She even took her despised older brother out to gather data with her, and even though she collapsed from fever she just kept on working away on her cell phone. So I’m not surprised the result would be so good. Even though you didn’t even look at it... don’t just belittle her efforts!”

It was almost as if I was yelling at myself. It was anger at myself for being jealous of my hugely different little sister, of resigning myself to just considering her as a special case and not even trying to see how hard she had worked.

“I really don’t know how much you’ve worked up until now. But, don’t just use that as an excuse to say that my sister didn’t try! Don’t underestimate my little sister!”

At that point, it seemed that the people around me had finally recovered from the surprise of my sudden outburst.

“... You idiot. Don’t interrupt people while they’re speaking.”

“... What the hell do you understand?”

Both Kuroneko and Fate glared at me, as if telling me to back off.

But! I turned their anger right back at them!

“But I said I don’t understand, right?! Just listen! Alright?! Alright? The most useless person here is me! The most pathetic person here is also me! I have no idea what you two are feeling right now, but there’s no mistaking that! Because, when I compare myself with you two, I really haven’t put in any effort at all! Haven’t tried at all! Even though such an amazing little sister was right next to me, I couldn’t get close to her or learn anything from her! Compared to that, you two have tried much more!”

The true feelings I had wanted to say came flying out of my mouth.

“I really respect her! This is quite an amazing accomplishment, isn’t it?! I love her! She’s really amazing!”

“Wha-” “....”

Across from me, Fate widened her eyes. I heard Kuroneko’s breath catch next to me.

I might have said a bit too much, but at this point I didn’t have the time to care.

I clenched my teeth, tightened my fists, and my voice became strained.

“So... when you say you haven’t gotten results, or when you say you feel helpless... that might be the case, but don’t say that so much! What’s going to happen if you hate on yourself so much?! I mean, what about someone like me, who hasn’t tried half as much as you?! I should just go and die, right?! That’s right, isn’t it, dammit! ... Ghng...”

“... Nii-san, are you aware of how incoherent you sound right now? And why exactly are you crying?”

“Shut the hell up! It’s because you two are teasing me, isn’t it?! Whatever, just give it back! That was something really important to my little sister! So I’m begging you, just give it back! I’ll do anything, just don’t take away all her precious work! Don’t just waste all the hard work *you’ve* done up until now! Dammit, I don’t know how to say this... I don’t even know what the hell I’m saying anymore... just please!”

I banged my head down onto the desk forcefully and begged desperately without even

glancing to the side.

“... You...”

Fate opened her eyes wide at my unsightly, violent attitude. I really looked like a terrible sison right now, didn't I? Even though I'm really not. Definitely, definitely not.

“... Quite shameful, aren't you, oniisan...? My my...”

Kuroneko ridiculed me contemptuously, and then faced Fate.

“... I will ask you to return her work as well. To have your own story turned into a book, and to have it be read by many people... how happy and wonderful that makes you feel is something that you should know more than anyone, right?”

Kuroneko's prodding voice was quite a different beast than the voice smeared with jealousy and hatred she had been using just a minute ago. It was kind, gentle... and overflowing with sincerity.

“So please, give her work back... I mean, just because our own efforts have not bore fruit up until now, no matter how frustrated or jealous or how intolerable you find it, this isn't just something where the ends justify the means. Say whatever you want about me, but please do not curse everything you yourself have done up until this point. If you do... I really will curse you to death.”

It was a conclusion quite becoming of her. Wait... even if I didn't break in, she was planning on persuading Fate like this all along, wasn't she? She was planning on saying what I wanted to say in a much better way like this all along, wasn't she? Geez... even though you had said you didn't care, and that it served her right... I wasn't the only one being incoherent, was I? ... Ugh.

I had already broken out into tears. Ugh, this isn't good. When I come back to my senses, I'm sure that I'm going to be embarrassed to death.



Having been hit with both my pathetic entreaty and Kuroneko's sincere appeal one after the other, Fate caught her breath... and finally, resignedly sighed.

"... You all... just saying whatever the hell you want... this is why I don't like brats. Now I know firsthand why Rino's cell phone novel seemed so incoherent. If she used people like you as a model, there's no wonder it turned out that way."

She spoke slowly as if a burden had been lifted from her shoulders.

"... At this point, I think I would be able to write something like 'Maisora' as well. Just like the real Rino."

It was, in effect, a declaration of defeat.

I had begged her with a line of thought that bore no rhyme or reason, and was more driven by pure momentum than anything I had done before.

But even so, I wanted to believe that I had managed to get something across.

"... Eh, and I mean, don't you two hate your little sister?"

It seemed like she was still confused when it came to that point. Well, I can't blame her.

I'm her brother, so what else could I do? That irrational line of thought was nothing more than a means of trying to force people to understand all these things even I couldn't comprehend. Even though I hated her, even though there was no mistaking that, I couldn't respond in any other way to this situation. These unstoppable impulses were definitely things that only people who have stood in positions similar to mine could understand.

And then...

"... Hmph."

One step before I could lift my head off the table, Kuroneko sent back her response.

“Not trying to brag, but I do have just a *few* friends.”⁹⁴

Missing seeing her expression when she said that... it was something I would regret for the rest of my life.

4.9 Fourth Chapter Part Nine

And then... well, let's talk about what happened afterwards in regards to the plagiarism situation.

Iori Fate Setsuna admitted to having stolen the novel... umm, what exactly should I call her at this point...? Well, let's just go with Fate, like we've been doing up until now.

In any case, it seemed that Fate thought of the idea of stealing Kirino's work after reading her submission on the Cell Phone i-Club and being deeply impressed by that work.

“... This really might seem strange considering how much I was bashing it before. But it was really interesting, seriously. Of course, the writing style wasn't good at all, and the grammar was terrible... if this were me ten years ago reading it, I probably would have wanted to kill her. But, you could really feel that she was having fun from the bottom of her heart while she was writing it. It was as if she was proudly shouting ‘Hey look, this is me!’ right in your face. But really, that was how I was like ten years ago too. Writing my first novel, I thought in a similar way, and definitely had a great time writing it. ‘Let's do that, and this,’ and getting a thrill out of it all. It really reminded me of those times... and for some reason I suddenly felt this annoyed, absurd feeling welling up in me...”

And then she had given into temptation.

⁹⁴Kuroneko's line here is usually translated as “I don't have many friends at all,” and usually carries a negative connotation. But here it carries a bit of an ironic positive connotation, and can be seen as a belated response to Fate's earlier accusation that she has no friends, so it is more aptly translated like this.

“... I really am very sorry. I was just being... I mean, from the very beginning I knew that I wouldn’t be able to write something like ‘Rino’ did. Even though I knew that from the very beginning...”

“... You really should be saying that to the person herself instead of us.”

“Yeah... I really should.”

Kumagai-san also lowered his head towards us.

“I really do apologize as well. There was absolutely no excuse for what had happened. I will have to apologize to the real Rino-sensei as well.”

After that, he also said this:

“The special thing about cell phone novels may be precisely what Fate-chan had felt. If you ask me, each and every one of us has the power to write things that only we can write, and to use that uniqueness to deeply impact a great number of people. This does not apply to only cell phone novels, but also doujinshi and doujinshi games, web novels, and even submissions on Nico Nico Douga and pixiv.⁹⁵ And in these amateur works, it is common to find scattered about hints of the unique visions that the creators had for their work. You can see all the interesting bits and pieces laid bare there; bits and pieces that wouldn’t survive the editing process if the work were to be prepared for sale on the market. Just like how it works with cell phone novels, you should seek to capitalize as much as possible on the uniqueness your works have as amateur works - the fact that this type of model actually can hold its own in the market is proof in itself that amateurs can sometimes surpass professionals. Of course, I won’t deny that there are works among these that are severely lacking technically... but nevertheless, just because these works can be a mixed bag is no reason to just lump them all together and reject them all.”

“On the one hand, Fate-chan and Kuroneko-san. The work you two have done does not interest our company very much, and we definitely would not be able to publish it. That is

⁹⁵Pixiv is an art submission site.

something that probably will not change. But, I firmly believe that the work you want to do still has a wonderful possibility to touch a lot of people. In other words, it's like this."

A wicked grin appeared on his face.

"Please continue to try as much as you can."

To those same words, Kuroneko had once responded with nothing but animosity... but this time, her eyes soon burned with the flame of determination to triumph over this old man.

And then...

That day, Fate-san got in touch with Kirino, and after Kirino recovered from the flu both Kumagai-san and Fate-san went to apologize together. They gave her a rundown of the facts and details surrounding the situation (of course, they kept Kuroneko and my involvement in the matter a secret), and lowered their heads.

Kirino responded with something like "Ah, it's fine. To be honest, it really wasn't bothering me anymore," and readily forgave them. I thought "But you were crying about this, weren't you?" but it really did seem like outside of me, Kuroneko, and Saori, Kirino managed to be pretty nice. If only on the surface. Well, granted, it was true that she was quite famous in this neighborhood even though her real personality was like *that*. Geez, what a screwed up world we live in.

By the way, I heard about what had happened from Fate and Kirino separately.

"By the way, you seemed to be pretty bothered by what was happening, so I'll tell you now."

"Not like I really care. Hmph, well, the book went out under your name, right?"

"Yeah. Well, it was a bother to change it, so we just kept the penname as 'Rino.' Kumagai-san had said that doing that would make the book sell better. Hm, but..."

“What?”

“Nothing... hmm... it’s just... there’s something that doesn’t make sense here. I mean, in the time I was stuck in bed, everything just resolved on its own, right? And I wasn’t planning on doing anything about it either...”

“What’s with that attitude? Just be happy that everything ended up going well.”

I listened to my sister’s complaints with complicated feelings.

... Also, although I don’t really want to say it... my relationship with my sister hadn’t really changed at all.

Granted, I had realized many things about our relationship after getting involved in this whole affair. But it was already too late. Even if I understood my reasons a bit better, that didn’t change the fact that I still hated my little sister.

“... Sorry for everything up until now, Kirino.”

“...? What the hell are you saying?”

Nothing. Nothing at all.

4.10 Fourth Chapter Part Ten

It was February. Around half a month after those events, Kirino appeared to have recovered from the flu and jumped right back into her work and club activities. I stopped seeing the once familiar sight of her going around fiddling with her cell phone, so when I asked her about her novels, she gave me this response.

“Ah, that? I stopped.”

She had already agreed to take on a second volume, but it seemed that her days as a novelist would stop after that. She had already written up the manuscript for the second volume, so there wasn't much left for her to do.

From all the fuss of this episode, I had come to realize that being able to publish a book was quite an amazing accomplishment, so I was quite shocked. I mean... there are people who have been devoting themselves to this for ten years but haven't been able to publish anything, you know? Is it really alright... for her to just so casually throw that away?

Did Kuroneko know about this?

Various doubts and feelings ran through my head, but Kirino seemed resolute. She had already sent her apologies to Kumagai-san and all the readers who were hoping to read more. Call it professionalism if you want, or rather a strong sense of duty.

"It's just that now, there are other things I definitely want to do. I have priorities, so I have to stop with the cell phone novels. I've also learned a lesson from collapsing after working too hard."

"Things you want to do? You don't mean new eroge releases, do you?"

"T-There's that too, sure!"

T-This girl! "I want to play eroge, so I can't keep on writing books"... if the aspiring novelists of the world heard you say that they would kill you, you know?! Geez, this is why people who are overly talented piss me off. Producing incredible results, but then nonchalantly throwing that away and moving right onto the next thing. For people who have spent their lives grinding away for results, all they would be able to say would be "I can't take this anymore!"

"You're thinking something rude, aren't you?! That's not the only thing I want to do!"

"Well then, what?"

“Huh? Why the hell do I have to tell you?”

Fine! Forget I asked!

Well, leaving that little exchange aside, today, for the first time in a while, Kirino’s otaku friends had gathered at our house.

Now that I think about it, this was the first time Saori had come over to our house.

Also, I may have said that this was the first time in a while, but it really had been a few months since Kirino, Kuroneko, and Saori (with me as the extra) had been under the same roof together. Well, granted, they didn’t go the same school, so it’s not a surprise. Things pile up, and they don’t have enough time to see each other.

So, really, you could say that this was a bit of a reunion party for friends who had not seen each other in a while. You might think that sounds pretty charming, but...

“Honestly, wasn’t this supposed to be the continuation of the anime appreciation event we had last time?! So isn’t it obvious we should finish watching Meruru when we stopped in the middle of an episode last time?! But you want to play Siscali?! Why the hell would I invite you over just to be forced to play what you’re good at?! Hey, answer me, you piece of shit cat!”

“Isn’t it natural that the host should make the guest feel comfortable? Even though I used up my long-awaited break to come here, the host seems intent on forcing us to do only what she wants to do... exactly what is the meaning of that? I even went so far as to bring a present for you.”

When these two got together, it quickly devolved into this. Didn’t they have other things they wanted to talk about that had built up over the past months? Why did they have to break out into a fight every time they met? Or was it that these fights were just their way of showing their affection for each other?

By the way, I guess I should mention that right now, we were in our living room. When I returned from the kitchen, carrying the snacks and juice I always prepared in situations like this, their battle had already begun.

I didn't want to spill the juice, so I didn't dare approach the table.

"... Gift? Could you mean this?"

As veins throbbed in Kirino's forehead, she took out a bundle of A4-sized papers.

Kuroneko calmly crossed her arms and nodded. She spoke in an incredibly sarcastic tone.

"Yes, precisely. You should be thankful for all my work in collecting those online reviews of *Maisora* and bringing them to you. You're curious about how it was doing, aren't you? Ms. Rino-sensei."

"Hmph, and that's why you cherry-picked all the trashy reviews and printed them out to show me?! How much of a crappy personality do you have?!"

"... How upsetting. This is the proof of our friendship, you know. It's a kind warning that you shouldn't get too full of yourself just because some overly generous readers praised the garbage you wrote."

"Why the hell do you care?! And what are you warning me about so smugly like that? Heh, you're just bitter, aren't you?! Nice one, you dumbass jealous wannabe!"

Continuing on by repeating "nice one!" over and over, Kirino began to mock Kuroneko with all her might.

"Kyahaha! Kyaaahahaha! Haaheehee~"

Almost dancing about, Kirino began to clap. While she looked at Kuroneko's face...

"Hey, what are you feeling right now? Hey hey, seeing someone who started writing after you debut before you, what are you feeling right now? If you don't like it, why don't you just go and debut yourself? Doesn't it embarrass you as a creator to only be able to deal with

your grudges by harassing me so childishly like this~?”

“..... Grrrrrrrrrr.....”

Kuroneko was making a face I couldn't show to polite company. I really do wonder what she's feeling right now...

Kuroneko had gone through a lot to protect Kirino's cell phone novel too.

She had to bear with harsh criticism of her own doujinshi, verbally sparred with Fate-san, aired out her unsightly jealousy, but even after all that could put everything aside with a “but that is that” and sincerely wished to help save Kirino's work. And then to be called a dumbass jealous wannabe by the very person you saved... it was just pretty terrible treatment all around.

... No, that's not quite right.

Both Kuroneko and I had done what we had done solely to do something about the currents of jealousy swirling in our chests, and definitely had not done anything for Kirino's sake. So it would be illogical to be hoping for any words of thanks from her.

I'm her brother, so what else could I have done? She's her friend, so what else could she have done? Those might have been excuses, but you couldn't say that they were only excuses. Even if we didn't say it out loud, Kuroneko and I both understood this.

Yes. Things had turned out *just fine*.

I mean, in the first place, if we told Kirino the truth about what had happened, it would be terribly embarrassing and would be nothing but committing suicide. Kuroneko and I were both determined to take this secret with us to our graves.

Speaking of what I had gained from this entire experience, I guess I had achieved a strange semblance of camaraderie with Kuroneko.

Kuroneko and I definitely had similar feelings when it came to Kirino.

This was a gathering of the victims of Kousaka Kirino. A get-together of small-minded people who pretended to be strong even when they were gripped by envy and jealousy.

That was us... ugh, she's really getting full of herself, this completely uncute little sister of mine.

Well, it's not like I could help being irritated here. Hey, why don't I take a leaf from our *club president's* book and say something provoking myself?

"Hey hey Kirino, you're an author, aren't you? Do you really think you should be taking up such an arrogant tone towards the people who read your book? They all took precious time out of their schedules just to read it, you know. Well? The appropriate thing to do here would be to just keep quiet and listen to their advice, wouldn't it?"

"Are. You. An. Idiooot?!"

Never before had I received such heartfelt words from my little sister.

I really wanted to believe that this personality problem was her problem alone, and that authors in general didn't have this issue.

After hitting me hard with her intense "Are you an idiot?!" Kirino suddenly seemed to have realized something, and began to scrutinize the top page on the pile of papers Kuroneko had given her.

"... By the way, this site's URL here... I've seen it on your SNS Profile Page, I think..."

"That's my site."

"... Wha...?!"

With no shortage of shock and anger, Kirino stiffened, with an expression like this → (°△°). The muscles on her face convulsed.

“Y-Y-You....”

“Is that your new impression of a chicken?”

“I’ll kill you! I’ll completely murder you! Y-You... Y-Y-Y-You.....”

“K-Kiririn-shi! Calm down! What are you going to do with that ashtray?!”

I had already began to run to try to stop Kirino, but Saori was one step ahead of me and bound Kirino’s arms behind her back.

Nevertheless, as she watched Kirino being restrained, Kuroneko began to throw oil on the fire.

“Hah, as expected from a cell phone novelist, your vocabulary is severely lacking.”

“Kyaaaaaaaaah?! Y-You just listen to me good! Alright?! Sooner or later, I’m definitely going to flood your damn site with flames!”

“... Hmph, how boring. Kukuku... I look forward to that. I’ll let you experience firsthand the power of someone who has been around since the golden age of text sites...”⁹⁶

“Y-Y-You stink of jakigan as usual, don’t you?! This is why you go so far as to bury blog posts with gross comments! Also, you’re wearing the same damn Gothic Lolita outfit today... what are you supposed to be, some Digital Cute Eroge⁹⁷ character or something?!”

⁹⁶Term regarding a generally obsolete type of website back when websites focused less on interactive features and more just on text.

⁹⁷Eroge company. Feel free to Google if you want, but beware of NSFW.



“Wha... what did you say? O-Once again, you’ve said something you shouldn’t say... you round-faced model. Let me just take this opportunity to say that it’s really gaudy for a junior high schooler to be running around with makeup on. Don’t come too close to me, or that perfume reeking of bitch will get stuck to my clothes too.”

“Shut up! Wear different clothes once in a while, dammit!”

For close to ten minutes after that, the two of them continued to throw cheap shots at each other.

In any case, when I asked Saori, she told me that the impetus for this conflict came when they had a difference of opinion over what they should do first today.

I would expect that from kids just starting elementary school. But seriously, it’s unbecoming of junior high school students to be doing this.

Just hearing about what was happening tired me out, but for some reason Saori seemed happy. She was probably just glad that this group could finally get together again after such a long time.

And her happiness was quite contagious. Even though I knew, I asked anyway.

“... Hey, what are you smiling about?”

“Well, I was just thinking back on the first time we all met each other... over half a year has passed since then, right...? My my, time sure does fly.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

Time certainly did fly. It flew, and during this short half a year I felt like I had changed quite a lot. For better or for worse.

If I hadn’t picked up that DVD case my sister had dropped... I probably wouldn’t be standing here with these people right now, I think. And now, I no longer just thought of

Kuroneko and Saori as “my little sister’s friends,” but rather also as my own friends... as very important people to me. I hadn’t met with them very often, but this wasn’t about how many times we’ve met. Am I wrong? Haha, that’s so out of character for me, those words.

As I sunk into these serious contemplations, Kirino took a break from arguing with Kuroneko and cut into Saori and my conversation.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Kiririn-shi. Haha, well, if you want to decide what we should do first, why don’t we do the same thing that we did the first time we met?”

“What do you mean?”

Kuroneko cut in and asked about Saori’s proposal. But I had already caught onto what she meant.

“That, remember? Going in order and each of us getting a turn to speak.”

“As expected from Kyouusuke-shi, getting right to the point. At that time, we were allowed to ask the person introducing himself or herself a question... that kind of game.”

That was a game?

Kirino seemed to consent to this idea, and nodded.

“... How nostalgic. Kukuku... the first time we met, you were huddled up like a scared little kitten, weren’t you...?”

“Wha-...”

At Kuroneko’s recollection, Kirino flushed a brilliant red.

“Y-You weren’t any better, were you?!”

“Well well... hahaha, it is quite nostalgic. After that, you both really hit it off after talking about anime...”

“Don’t be an idiot. Who the hell would ‘hit it off’ with this woman...”

“We definitely didn’t ‘hit it off’!”

They both collectively denied Saori’s statement. Ah, yes, it was like that. They had a difference of opinion over Meruru and Maschera, and got into a fight then too. And ever since then they had been like that. In a sense, they haven’t changed at all. Just thinking about it made me smile.

... Hm, what was this? Could it be that I was enjoying a moment of reminiscence here? Ohh, that’s pretty amazing if that’s true. To think that I would be able to reminisce about something with my little sister.

Don’t get me wrong though. It’s not like I’m happy about it.

Saori forcibly pulled Kuroneko and Kirino apart as they had their glaring match. In order to steer the course of the argument in a different direction, she began to go on and on.

“In other words, this time, the one who gives the most interesting response to the topic can decide what we’re going to do. And, the topic this time is ‘something unexpected that happened to you recently.’ Let’s go in the same order as last time... Kuroneko-shi, go ahead!”

“... As always, you’re just arbitrarily deciding things...”

The first time we had met, Kuroneko had said something similar. But even so, she didn’t seem as displeased as she let on. And she continued in the same way she had that time long ago.

“Well, fine.... Hmph ‘something unexpected that happened to you recently,’ was it? ... Well...”

Kuroneko pondered the issue for a bit, and finally spoke in an indifferent tone while watching Kirino.

“Your brother confessed his love to me.”⁹⁸

Cough! Cough! Cough! Cough!

I gasped for air. Kuroneko! What the hell?! W-W-W-What the hell are you saying...?!

Certainly, I said something like that, but that was... that is...!!

Dammit! Through my violent coughs, I couldn’t even put my explanation into words!

As that was happening, Saori bent forward in curiosity and raised her voice.

“Hoh hoh hoh hoh hoh... and what exactly is the meaning of this? Please do fill us in on the details!”

“... Sorry, but I cannot. That’s our little secret. Right, niisan?”

“You’re already making her call you niisan?! Kyouzuke-shi, there’s a limit to how much you can be into eroge!”

“Noooooooooooooooooooo!!! Saori, what the hell?! You’re just being cruel on purpose!”

“Naturally.”

⁹⁸Kuroneko says that he confessed his love, but never really specifies who he confessed his love about (an ambiguity that is much more pronounced in Japanese than in English). A more literal interpretation of her statement might be “He made a statement of love to me.”

This asshole! I'll get both of them back for this someday! My fist shook in frustrated annoyance.

As if dealing the finishing blow, Kirino, the only one who wasn't in on the joke, sent me a scornful look.

"..... Gross."

She looked incredibly displeased. She was probably not able to take the idea that I had gotten closer to Kuroneko.

She might even be thinking that I was stealing one of her friends away from me. If that were the case, it would admittedly be a pretty cute situation. In any case, Kirino didn't seem to think too much of Kuroneko's response. Her chances of victory seemed to have slimmed.

Saori next announced that it was Kirino's turn, but having been put in a bad mood, Kirino turned away with an "I'm still thinking..." Having no other choice, Saori spoke cheerfully in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere a bit.

"Well, it's my turn then! Hmm, let's see... 'something unexpected that happened to you recently'... hm, I wonder what I should say..."

She didn't think of an answer even though she was the one who had proposed the topic? Well, it was pretty like her to do that, though.

Finally, Saori clapped her hands once, and hit us with quite an amazing announcement.

"The incident where I went to an arranged marriage meeting while I wore this outfit and the person I was meeting fainted."

How sad! I was so filled up on how to snarkily respond to her statement that I didn't even know where to begin, but that's really not something "unexpected that happened to you," right? Instead, it was something "traumatic that happened to whomever you were visiting."

“Disqualification.”

Our voices harmonized. It seemed that everyone outside of Saori had come to the same conclusion.

“Ah, but I was so sure that was a good answer... well, that’s fine. Then, once again, it’s Kiririn-shi’s turn! Have you thought of anything yet?”

“Hm, well... I don’t think it’s anything that impressive, but I guess I’ve thought of something... ‘something unexpected that happened to you recently,’ right? Well then...”

Kirino spoke in an unexpectedly hesitant way.

“I guess when I bought a game called ‘Brute Brother’ and thought it was a little sister game, but it turned out to be a homo game.”⁹⁹

Yup, we have a winner.

What an awful conversation... I’m never playing one of Saori’s topic games ever again.

4.11 Fourth Chapter Part Eleven

And well, pretty much continuing in that way, the long-awaited otaku meeting came to an end. It seemed that their relationship hadn’t changed a single bit in the space of these few months. It made me a bit happy to see that.

I saw Kuroneko and Saori off with Kirino in the entranceway, and the minute I turned back into the house I went back to my room and began to study. Well... I mean... how do I put it... I felt like I really had to try hard as well, you know?

⁹⁹This was literally “homoge.” I could have translated it to yaoi or BL, but this way of saying it carries a slightly more negative connotation.

Like that, I continued to study for a little while...

“... Phew, I’m pretty thirsty.”

It’s unavoidable that I would get tired doing something I wasn’t used to doing. Shall I go wash my face, drink some water, and then give it one more go? Thinking that, I temporarily left my room and went down the stairs.

And then...

“Ommph.”

Right when I got down the stairs, near the entranceway, I collided with my plain-clothed sister. There had always been a blind spot here, so it was a spot where we had often crashed into each other.

Thump. My left shoulder struck against Kirino’s chest. The impact itself was not very strong, but it caused my sister’s bag to drop onto the floor, and the contents to spill out.

“Ah...”

“Oh, sorry.”

I sincerely apologized, and reached out for the cosmetics and other things that had spilled out... but I suddenly stiffened. What a strange sense of *déjà vu*...

“It’s fine, so don’t touch anything.”

I felt like I had heard those words before. Although, I had stopped my hand before it actually got down to the floor, so this time she hadn’t smacked my hand away...

... Tch. Just look at our relationship. In the end, it was still like this.

Feeling as if needles had been stuck into my chest, I watched as my sister began to pick up the cosmetics that had fallen onto the floor.

Having put the cosmetics back in her bag, Kirino scowled at me and put on her pumps.

“... Hey.”

“The next time I ask for life advice will be the last.”

... What did she just say right now?

For a while, I stood stock still in the entranceway, and stared at the door my sister had just gone out of.

5 Afterword

This is Fushimi Tsukasa. Thank you very much for picking up this book.

That this afterword is being read means that the third volume of this series has safely made it to publication, yes?

This time, even more than with the second volume, the volume was put through revision after revision, and couldn't even be properly sent to press. Even after it was submitted, there were many issues with it, and even now I am scared out of my wits. To everyone who had anything to do with the planning and execution of this book, let me just take this opportunity to apologize. I know how much of a bother it was to everyone.

So, how was the third volume?

If you thought it was even the least bit interesting, that would be a huge relief to me.

I am indebted to all the many people who helped me as I wrote this book. First, I would like to thank the ones who helped me research cell phone novels, as their work was invaluable to me. Even though this was a work of fiction, I really do apologize for making many of the characters in the novel speak ill of cell phone novels.

The illustrator was Kanzaki Hirosan. Thank you this time as well for your wonderful illustrations.

Next, the head editors Miki-san and Kobara-san. This time also, I was honored to receive your great support, especially in regards to all the help you gave me while I wrote the scenes in the editorial department. I know we butted heads over these parts very often, and that for various reasons these parts were inevitably revised and changed to take into account considerations in all directions, and that in the end this part became a focus in the revision process, but you two stayed with me until the very last revision. I really am grateful. Because of you two, I didn't abandon this project in the middle, and could do my best. In the afterwords for the first two volumes, I also mentioned that this book wasn't written through my own power alone, and that fact has absolutely not changed.

6 Translator's Afterword

After a bit of a delay, I am pleased to be able to release the third volume of Oreimo in English! There was quite a bit more Kuroneko in this volume, so I was pleased. I'm looking forward to volume 4!

My editors were as indispensable as ever. A huge thanks to meh for doing much of the code that allowed the encoding of this PDF to be as painless as possible. This was also the first volume of Oreimo our new editor WildKaiser has been with us, and he did a wonderful job.

In the interest of keeping this afterword short so I can get right to the next volume, let me just thank my editors for their efforts and my readers for their support. I hope you will continue to follow us as we delve deeper and deeper into this series.

-NanoDesu

7 Translation Credits

Translator/Evil Overlord

- NanoDesu

Editors

- Meh
- WildKaiser



9784048677585

ISBN978-4-04-867758-5

C0193 ¥570E



1920193005707



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MEDIA
WORKS

発行● アスキー・メディアワークス

定価: 本体 **570 円**

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